

Betel Nut Consumption in Contemporary Taiwan: Gender, Class and Social Identity

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Abstract

Betel nut is a controversial but legally consumed substance in Taiwan. Contemporary betel nut consumption has seen a revival since the 1970s. It is estimated that there are 3 million betel nut users in Taiwan and more than 90 percent of them are male. Certain images of betel nut consumption have made the majority of Taiwanese (especially urbanites, the middle class, and intellectuals) criticize betel nut chewing, as unhealthy, uncouth, and not modern, but there is no evidence indicating that its consumption will decrease anytime soon.

This study provides an anthropological approach to better understand why, despite such opposition, the phenomenon continues. This study is based on three months of fieldwork in Pingdong, Taiwan, from May to August 2005. The primary methods used were participant observation and in-depth interviews.

I find that Taiwan's economic transformation provided the pushing force to restart contemporary betel nut consumption. Yet, the reason for its continuing popularization is related to betel nut usage being intertwined with gender, class, and social identity in Taiwan. Firstly, betel nut is a significant symbol of masculinity in the Han Taiwanese context. From exploring people's first time chewing betel nut, I find trying betel nut is a part of male group wandering and through this male group, Taiwanese men are socialized into masculinity. In addition, trying betel nut is experiencing adulthood for them.

Furthermore, class is the key to understanding betel nut consumption although betel nut consumers deny their consumption is associated with their class. Betel nut consumers explain betel nut chewing as due to whether someone is *siwen* or not.

Siwen itself, however, refers to the idea of class—a culturally defined class, not an economically defined one. Moreover, betel nut consumers appropriate the mainstream discourse of hygiene, explaining their behavior as resulting from individual choice and not being dirty. They also claim to do it to help them work harder, as their way to rebel against mainstream discourse and further justify their behavior.

Finally, through analyzing why “betel nut is a symbol of native Taiwan,” I find the association of locality and ethnicity is a third key to understanding betel nut. This association further becomes an important component for constructing a Taiwanese identity, in contrast with Chinese identity. Moreover, through exploring the myth of “the Aborigine origin of betel nut chewing,” I show how the image of the Aborigines symbolizes the authenticity of Taiwanese culture. This authenticity is necessary to create Taiwanese identity as well as Taiwanese nationalism.

摘要

在台灣，檳榔是一合法但備受爭議的物質。當代檳榔消費是1970年後興盛的。據估計，全台有近三百萬的消費者，其中九成以上是男性。台灣人大多反對檳榔，然而並沒有證據顯示檳榔消費會減少。

本文從人類學角度探討為什麼檳榔消費在台灣如此流行。我認為經濟轉變是當代檳榔消費興盛的動力，但是檳榔繼續普及是與其所蘊含的性別、階級、與社會認同因素相關。在台灣漢人文化脈絡裡，檳榔是高度陽剛的。從消費者的檳榔初體驗中發現，嘗試檳榔是男子團體活動之一，而此團體是台灣男人社會化陽剛氣質的主要場所。其次，藉由嘗試檳榔，他們在體驗成人的滋味。

另外，階級是了解檳榔消費的關鍵，即便檳榔消費者否定階級。然而，當他們用「斯文」來解釋吃檳榔時，其實正指涉階級，只是這不是經濟定義的階級，而是文化。他們藉著挪用主流的衛生論述，以及宣稱嚼檳榔是個人選擇與為了工作，來抵制主流論述並合理化他們的行為。

最後，從探討「檳榔是本土文化的象徵」中，我發現在地性與族群性與檳榔消費的關連，而此關連是台灣認同建構的重要內涵。另外，從檳榔起源迷思（原住民）中得知，原住民象徵台灣文化的本真性，此一本真性對於台灣國族主義的建構是必要的。

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Chapter 1: the Introduction

Taiwan Betel Nut Puzzle

In the summer of 2004, I went to Meinung—a rural Hakka village in southern Taiwan—to be a temporary volunteer helper in a foreign-spouses support organization. That was how I first met A-Fang-mei. A-Fang-mei, a Vietnamese woman, married her Taiwanese husband and moved to Taiwan when she was twenty years old. When I met her, she had three young children. We sat down to chat about some of the differences between Vietnam and Taiwan, and suddenly she said, “You Taiwanese are very strange.” She told me that the place in Vietnam she originally came from was quite rural. According to her, in Vietnam, even where she came from, there were very few people who chewed betel nut. Only old people chewed betel nut. Young people did not chew it because it was not modern. She asked me, “Isn’t Taiwan more modern than Vietnam? Why do you Taiwanese like to chew betel nut so much?”

I do not know whether Taiwan is more “modern” than Vietnam, but her question puzzles me. What did she see in Taiwan? What makes her have such doubts? I will highlight some points here to make her question clearer. First, her marriage is not just a random match-up, it is instead a result of the different positions of Taiwan and other Southeast Asian countries in the world system. As Taiwan’s economy developed, men in rural areas and manual laborers in the cities have had greater difficulties finding Taiwanese women to marry since marriage is often about women marrying up rather than marrying down. The resulting decision for these Taiwanese men then is either not to marry or to marry women from neighboring countries where the economy is less developed such as Vietnam, Cambodia, or the People’s Republic

of China. Therefore, to A-Fang-mei, Taiwan is supposed to be a more “modern” and developed country. Furthermore, the Taiwanese government has spent a lot of effort trying to build a high-tech image for Taiwan.

After A-Fang-mei married her Taiwanese husband and moved to Taiwan, she was surprised to see many Taiwanese men chewed betel nut. As she said, betel nut chewing is a traditional custom in Vietnam. In fact, not only in Vietnam, but also in many other betel nut chewing areas, such as India, Thailand, Malaysia, Africa, and the Pacific Islands, betel nut chewing is a traditional cultural practice that had been practiced for centuries. In many of the above places, such as Thailand, Vietnam, and Malaysia, however, betel nut chewing is a dying tradition because the younger generations see it as not modern and even “backward.”

Thus, from A-Fang-mei’s perspective, Taiwan is a high-tech and “modern” place, but it is also one where many Taiwanese men are involved in this traditional, not modern, and to a certain degree “backward” custom. Betel nut’s popularity is much greater than she would have expected. In fact, just as this is a puzzle to A-Fang-mei, it is also a puzzle to many other Taiwanese.

In January 1992, *Tianxia Magazine*, an influential and elite-oriented magazine in Taiwan, published a cover story titled “Betel Nut Culture—The Contradiction between Civilization and the Primitive.”¹ This title clearly expresses the contradictory feelings that Taiwanese have in relation to betel nut consumption. Many Taiwanese are upset about the widespread existence of betel nut chewing occurring even as Taiwan is becoming a more international, modern, and developed country. To many Taiwanese, the two things do not go together. Betel nut chewing and being a hi-tech, modern, and “cosmopolitan” place fundamentally contradict each other. The

¹ The original Chinese title is “*binlang wenhua—wenming yu yuanshi de maodun* (檳榔文化—文明與原始的矛盾).”

“cosmopolitan” here indicates a specific “world image,” as Josephine Ho’s critique of the government’s anti-betel nut campaign indicates, “the Taiwan government thinks we should all look like Americans” (Boudreau 2002). To many Taiwanese and to these officials, being more “cosmopolitan” is *not* being more connected to Southeast Asia or India. It is supposed to mean being more connected with the Euro-American world. In this sense, just like A-Fang-mei’s doubt, Taiwanese also do not understand how, since the 1970s, as Taiwan has become more developed, more cosmopolitan, and more modern, there has also been a dramatic increase in betel nut consumption.

In 1999, the total betel nut growing area in Taiwan reached its highest point, 56,593 hectares, which was a 35-fold increase from 1972. In 2003, per person consumption of betel nuts was 7.1 kilograms while it was only 1.9 kilograms in 1984 (*Taiwan Agricultural Yearbook 2003*). It is estimated that there are almost 3 million betel nut users in contemporary Taiwan and annual profit from betel nut planting had already reached US 443 million dollars in 1998. Betel nut chewing has been commercialized and become a “modern” consumption activity. The usage of it today, to a large degree, is *not* in the context of “traditional cultural practice” at all; it is a new and “modern” phenomenon. Rooney Dawn (1993) observes that the idea of modernity and progress has led to the disappearance of betel nut chewing in Southeast Asia (cited from Li 2004:18). Why then has betel nut chewing not disappeared in Taiwan? Instead, there are more people chewing it than ever before.

Betel nut is actually not a “nut” at all. Rather it could be more accurately described as a “seed” or “fruit” because it lacks a nut’s characteristic hard shell. The basic recipe for betel nut chewing is betel nut and lime (calcium hydroxide). After adding the necessary ingredients to betel nut, it then becomes a “betel quid.” In this study, I use the phrase “betel nut” to refer to both the “nut” itself and the betel quid

when there is no need to emphasize their differences. Betel quid can turn chewers' saliva blood red. It is an addictive stimulant which gives a massive caffeine-like feeling and a mild buzz when it is tossed into the mouth and chewed. Users claim it provides a sense of well being, but its effect is very short, lasting only a few minutes. Chewing it increases one's heart rate and body temperature and it leaves a pungent, bitter taste.

While chewing it, people generally spit out the bright red betel juice combined with saliva. Betel nut chewing can stain teeth and, since many chewers spit on the ground, it can also stain sidewalks. Betel nut stain on the teeth will, over time, gradually color the users' teeth black. This red spit is so central to the image of betel nut that during fieldwork my informants often told me a joke about it. The joke is about a foreigner (usually an American man) who took a taxi in Taiwan. He saw the taxi driver spit up betel juice while he drove. This made a strong impression on him. Coming home, he couldn't stop talking about how hard working Taiwanese are—they continue working even when they spit up blood.

This joke is meant to be funny, but it is also quite insightful. In the joke, there are two major characters. One is an American visitor and the other is a Taiwanese taxi driver. The self-image for Taiwanese of Taiwan, as mentioned earlier, is an American style "cosmopolitan" place. Yet, the American fails to understand what betel nut chewing is since it is not a part of his world. The joke marks the contradiction Taiwanese feel between Taiwan wanting to be a modern place, like America, and visitors from that "modern place" having to see such a "traditional" habit. Luckily, the American, lacking the proper cultural knowledge, spares the Taiwanese embarrassment and instead highlights something Taiwanese are very proud of, their willingness to work hard. Furthermore, the value of hard work in this joke is one of

crucial aspects of understanding betel nut consumption in Taiwan. Chewing betel nut for working harder is a very important justification for betel nut users that I will analyze in detail in Chapter 4.

Even as betel nut chewing has increased, a majority of Taiwanese have a strongly negative image of it. This is especially true for urban, middle class, and highly educated people. They see betel nut chewing as not modern and even “backwards.” Moreover, many Taiwanese see betel nut chewing as unhygienic.

Furthermore, Taiwanese generally see betel nut as a “traditional” habit, which reinforces the idea of betel nut chewing as “backward.” For example, Chen Xinming and Han Liangjun (1998) wrote an article to clarify what they see as some “betel nut myths.” They point out that although some people claim betel nut chewing is a traditional custom and a symbol of native Taiwan—which we should therefore not prohibit—we should pay careful attention to whether or not such social customs have a “positive social value and function” (1998:47). Their comment is quite common in Taiwan. Many people who argue against betel nut chewing say that although we should preserve tradition, in order to improve society, we should not preserve traditions which are “negative” to society. In this sense, they imply that betel nut chewing is not only a “traditional” habit, but also a “backward” one that must be prohibited or abandoned for Taiwan to be fully modernized.

Moreover, in Taiwan, betel nut chewers are primarily thought of as drivers, both taxi and truck drivers, and manual laborers. Therefore, most Taiwanese think betel nut chewers are less educated, blue-collar workers and people from the countryside. This creates the impression of betel nut users as lower class people, especially as compared to well-educated, white-collar workers and urban middle class people.

Thus, many people think the image of betel nut chewing violates their imagination of being a cosmopolitan place—how could people walking in a cosmopolitan place have black teeth, red stained lips, chew something as they walk, and even occasionally spit red saliva? This goes against the mainstream imagination of modernity. At the extreme, betel nut chewing is seen as something that people forgot to deal with when they “evolved”—a sort of Tylorian “cultural survival.”

Despite these negative attitudes, Taiwan has seen a dramatic increase in the consumption of betel nut. Why has it been revived since the 1970s in spite of the fact that people think it is not modern? Why did betel nut chewing, rather than disappear in the process of modernization, evolve into a highly commercialized form of consumption? Why have more people picked up this habit despite mainstream society seeing betel nut users as a lower class? This odd phenomenon is what I call the “Taiwan betel nut puzzle” and the motivation for this ethnographic study is to unpack this puzzle.

The History of Betel Nut

Betel Nut on Mainland China

As late as the third century AD (Eastern Han Dynasty), according to various Chinese medicine texts, Han Chinese already knew betel nut chewing and its medicinal effects (Lin 2003).² As for imperial Chinese official historical records, the earliest story about betel nut chewing is the record of Liu Muzhi who lived from 358-417 AD. Liu’s story was recorded in the *History of Southern Dynasties* written by Li

² It seems the earliest written record on betel nut is from the Western Han Dynasty. Sima Xiangru (179-117 BC) in his poem *Shanglinfu* (上林賦 Supreme Park) mentioned a plant named *renpin* (仁頻). Literary critics in the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD) explained *renpin* (a word no longer used) as meaning betel palm. According to Lin Fushi (2003), since the Western Han conquered Nanyue (an area now comprising parts of Guangdong, Guangxi, and Vietnam), betel nut gradually entered the Han Chinese body of cultural knowledge.

Yanshou (659 AD). Liu lived in the Southern Dynasty and was quite poor when he was young. He often had to go to his wife's brother's home for food. Yet, his brother-in-law humiliated him because he dared to ask to chew betel nut after he finished his meal. Later on, Liu passed the imperial exam and became an official. When his brother-in-law came to visit and stayed for dinner, Liu did not take the chance to humiliate his brother-in-law in revenge. Instead, Liu hosted his brother-in-law after the meal (Ge 1996). As Lin Fushi explained, only people in the imperial family, nobles, and rich families in Southern China had access to betel nut and it was seen as a valuable and expensive thing during the Eastern Han and Southern Dynasties (2003:96).

A famous Chinese medicine text, *Bencao Gangmu* (本草綱目 *Great Compendium of Herbs*), written by Li Shizhen (1518-1596 AD) in the Ming Dynasty, recorded that people in south China used betel nut to host guests. Li also describes the medicinal effects of betel nut at the time as resisting poisonous vapors and dispelling parasites.

In the Qing Dynasty, the *Gujin Tushu Jicheng* (古今圖書集成 *A Compilation of Books Throughout History*) Scroll 285 is the collection of writings on betel nut since the Three Kingdoms (Yin 1990).³ The writing shows that some literati, such as Han Yu (韓愈) (768-824 AD) and Su Dongpo (蘇東坡) had chewed betel nut for medicinal effects such as resisting poisonous vapors,⁴ removing mucus, producing sweat, and so on. Among literati, Han Yu was seen as the “father” of the betel nut (Ge

³ This book is a Chinese encyclopedia, edited by Chen Menglei in 1725, during the Qing Dynasty. There are a total of 10,000 scrolls.

⁴ The original Chinese is “*zhangli*”(瘴癘), roughly meaning “poisonous vapors.” This would have included diseases, in modern medical terms, such as malaria.

1996:33).⁵ This story about Han Yu and respect for him as the father—and in some cases the god—of betel nut is well known in Taiwan among betel nut users and people in the betel nut business (Wang 1999).

During the Qing Dynasty, betel nut was the Manchurian nobles' snack (Zhu 2000:303). Wang (1999:200) thinks that this is because betel nut was planted in southern China and then became a form of conspicuous consumption for imperial families in northern China. Yin (1999) indicates some local histories on Guangdong and Fujian also recorded descriptions of betel nut and its usage.

Chinese believed the medicinal functions of betel nut to be strengthening teeth, improving digestion and stomach health, decreasing "heat,"⁶ expelling parasites, and resisting coldness although their relative emphasis on each of these effects changed through time (Li 2003:16). In addition, local geography and weather also influenced the different purposes for betel nut chewing. For example, people in north China chewed it to resist coldness and as a form of conspicuous consumption, while people in south China chewed it to resist poisonous vapors (*ibid.*).

Betel nut chewing is not a significant habit among Han Chinese in mainland China. To Han Chinese in mainland China, betel nut chewing is not seen as their habit; it is seen as a Taiwanese habit or a marginal one confined to minorities.⁷ According to some informal conversations with mainland Chinese, however, the younger generation of minorities tend not to chew betel nut because they see it as an older people's habit and not modern. In fact, Han Chinese in mainland China, when asked

⁵ This is widely believed in Taiwan. Han Yu was a very famous scholar-official in Chinese history. Like many literati, his political life did not go too well. When the emperor demoted and expelled him to the south, he got sick because of tropical disease. Native people gave Han Yu betel nut to resist poisonous vapors. After Han recovered, he promoted betel nut planting and usage.

⁶ In the system of Chinese medicine, there is both heat and coldness in the human body and in other materials in the world. The natural environment, seasonal change, and food all affect the relative amounts of heat and coldness in the body. A health body is seen as one which has a balance of heat and cold.

⁷ Han people in Hunan, for some unknown reasons, chew betel nut as well (Zhu 2000). Yet, betel nut chewing in general is not popular among Han Chinese.

to describe one thing they would like to see and try when they travel to Taiwan, often respond with trying betel nut chewing and seeing betel nut beauties.⁸ A Taiwanese friend, who moved to Shanghai for business more than one decade ago, told me that betel nut is not rare in Shanghai because many Taiwanese business people kept their betel nut chewing habit even after they moved to China. Therefore, in areas where Taiwanese cluster such as Shanghai and Dongguan, it is not uncommon to see someone chewing betel nut.

Betel Nut in Taiwan

In this section, I will describe the transformation of betel nut usage in the context of economic change in Taiwan. Furthermore, I will explain how this economic transformation occurred in relation to different sources of state power in Taiwan over time. It is important to highlight economic change because it was a major force in *starting* the popularization of betel nut chewing. Yet, it is also important to bear in mind that the cultural and symbolic meanings of betel nut usage have played an essential role in its continued popularity in Taiwan.

Before I go into detail, I would like to briefly introduce the different ethnic groups in Taiwan and clarify some terms in this thesis. The “Aborigines” in Taiwan comprise twelve different indigenous groups.⁹ They are the earliest residents of Taiwan and linguistically they belong to the Austronesian family of languages. They

⁸ Shi Zhenkang. 2005. “*Wuyi dalu youke laile Taiwan ying shangji* 五一大陸遊客來了台灣迎商機 (Mainland Tourists Come on May First. Taiwan Welcomes Business Benefit).” TVBS. 1 May.

⁹ The number of aboriginal groups has changed over time depending on different identification policies. It used to be nine groups, based on Japanese ruling policy. The KMT kept this categorization. Now the policy in relation to indigenous groups is based on their own subjective identification and recognition. That is to say, if a group of indigenous people thinks they are ethnically different from the original categorization, they can apply to be re-classified. The classification described here excludes the “plains aborigines,” who have been acculturated by the Han Chinese.

constitute two percent of Taiwan's population and now identify themselves as "*yuanzhumín* (原住民)" in Chinese, meaning original inhabitants.

"Native Taiwanese" include Holo, Hakka and the descendents of intermarriages between the Chinese (Holo and Hakka) and "plains aborigines" (or *pingpuzu* 平埔族). Holo is the name of the language that Holo people speak and it is how they name themselves in their own language. Holo is also known as "Hokkienese" or "Fujianese." Native Taiwanese migrated to Taiwan starting in the 17th century.¹⁰ In Taiwan, native Taiwanese are also called "*benshengren*" (本省人) which literally means people from "this" province.

"Mainlanders," comprising Chinese from different provinces in China, are people who retreated to Taiwan with the KMT after 1945. Mainlander in Mandarin is "*waishengren*" (外省人), meaning people from outside the province. They speak Mandarin, in addition to their own regional languages or dialects. In this thesis, I use "Taiwanese" to refer to everyone who lives in Taiwan now, whether they are native Taiwanese, Aborigines, mainlanders, or new migrants.

In addition, my review of these economic transformations excludes the time before the Dutch arrived in Taiwan. This does not imply, however, that Taiwan was a no man's land or that there was no economic activity. The ancestors of Taiwan's Aborigines settled in Taiwan as early as 15,000 years ago (Morris 2004). Yet, since the Aborigines did not have a written language, we do not know much about their life.

¹⁰ When Chinese first migrated to Taiwan is a subject of much political debate. However, scholars in general agree that Chinese did not migrate in great numbers until the 17th century.

The Dutch (1624-62) and Zheng (1662-84) Rule

In 1624, the Dutch set up a commercial base in Taiwan and started recruiting Chinese from coastal China, mainly Fujian and Guangdong, to develop the land and work for them. It was when the Dutch ruled the island that we find the first written record on betel nut usage in Taiwan. This was a surrender contract between the Dutch and one aboriginal group in what is now called Tainan. This contract mentions that the aborigine group, by giving their newly planted coconut and betel palms, showed their sincerity to give their land and obey the Dutch (Yin 1990: 81). Zhu Yixiang (2000) says this shows that betel nut was not simply an agricultural material to the Aborigines; it was used as a symbol that represented their sincerity and their group. Zhu said betel nut “was an important cultural symbol” to the Aborigines as early as the beginning of the Dutch rule (2000:203).

The Dutch had a very specific goal for ruling Taiwan—developing land resources for tax and trading (Hsu 1980). Wen-Hsiung Hsu indicates that the Dutch “exported Taiwan’s dried venison, sugar, and rattan to China; deerskins and sugar were sent to Japan as well as other countries” (1980:14). Since betel nut was used among local people and there was no evidence showing betel nut was particularly popular, “the Dutch did not pay any attention to betel nut production or come up with any policy concerning it”(Wang *et al.* 1997:154).

After Zheng Chenggong¹¹ took Taiwan from the Dutch, the main economic activity for Han Chinese was providing food for survival. Hsu says that Zheng “established salt farms and promoted the cultivation of rice but deemphasized that of sugar as a means to solve the food supply problem” (1980:26). Since betel nut production was neither a prominent competitor for land nor particularly relevant to

¹¹ Also named “Koxinga.” Zheng retreated to Taiwan in order to make Taiwan a military base for the Ming Dynasty to resist the Qing regime in the middle of the 17th century (or, by other sources, as a base for future attacks on the Philippines and beyond).

this goal, Zheng “did not have any policy to support or encourage betel nut” (Wang *et al.* 1997:154) either. There are no other records from either the Dutch (Yin 1990:81) or the Zheng periods on how, why, or which people chewed betel nut.

Qing Rule (1683-1895)

In 1683, the Qing government defeated Zheng and therefore took Taiwan into the Qing regime. However, the Qing government had very little control over Taiwan even though it was technically under its rule. Taiwan was still seen largely as “barbarian” area that was hard to control.¹² In fact, during 212 years of Qing rule over Taiwan, they recorded 171 disturbances among the people (Morris 2005:10). There was a saying among Qing officials at that time that Taiwan produced “a minor revolt every three years [and] a major one every five [years]”(*ibid.*).¹³

Despite the Qing government prohibiting people from coastal China from migrating to Taiwan, many migrants ignored the order and smuggled themselves across the Taiwan Strait.¹⁴ By the end of the 18th century and into the early 19th century, Han Chinese had developed most of the land on the west coast of Taiwan and had largely pushed the Aborigines to the interior. Han Chinese started to gain better living standards and more money. There was thus an increase in betel nut consumption among ordinary people. People spent a lot of money on betel nut and Qing officials criticized it as wasteful (Zhu 2000). Some intellectuals wrote articles to

¹² From 1684-1875, Taiwan was a Prefecture under Fujian Province. However, after the Opium War, various powers, such as Britain, the United States, and Japan, began to show interest in ruling Taiwan (Wu and Winkler 2005:138). Therefore, Qing rulers also started paying more attention to Taiwan and upgraded it to a province in 1875 (*ibid.*:146).

¹³ In fact, after the Sino-Japan war, Li Hongzhang (the official who represented the Qing government) tried to convince the Japanese not to take Taiwan by pointing out that there was deadly malaria, British opium pushers, and the rebellious bandits who kill officials (Morris 2005).

¹⁴ Since Zheng moved to Taiwan, the Qing government prohibited Chinese from leaving China and therefore going to Taiwan in order to prevent Zheng from recruiting Chinese on mainland China to join his regime.

describe how much they disliked betel nut chewing because of its bloody red spit and the waste of money (Zhu 2000; Yin 1990).

Meanwhile, from this Qing period, there are significantly more records, including local histories and personal travel literature, available about betel nut usage among both Aborigines and native Taiwanese. Betel nut had various functions, the first of which is related to its medicinal effects. Taiwan is a sub-tropical island and there were many tropical diseases on the island. Migrants chewed betel nut as one way to resist coldness¹⁵ and tropical diseases (Yin 1990).

Secondly, people consumed betel nut as a way of creating social relations. This needs to be understood in the context of Taiwan as a migrant society. While more and more Chinese migrated to Taiwan, there were increasing ethnic conflicts between Han Chinese and the Aborigines as well as among different between Han Chinese groups (see Murray 1994). One way local people sought to solve conflicts was to give out tobacco or hold banquets. Wu Micha and Robin Winkler say, “betel nuts [...] were also used to reconcile disputes among neighbors” (2005:121). Similarly, in order to recruit followers, leaders often gave out betel nut as a way to gain support (Yin 1990). By giving and accepting betel nut, people could create or symbolize solidarity with each other.

The end of the Qing dynasty was when the consumption of betel nut became more popular. During this time, betel nut had already begun to be bought and sold on the market. According to *Fujian Tongzhi Taiwanfu* (福建通誌台灣府 *General Gazetteer of Fujian, Taiwan*), there were professional betel nut sellers in the markets at least since 1824 (Zhu 2000:314). There were also already small-scale betel nut distribution networks at this time.

¹⁵ Although Taiwan is a subtropical island, the temperature in winter does get quite low. Resisting coldness here means to resist cold days, instead of the Chinese medicinal concept of hot and cold.

In this sense, it is important to identify how economic change and the cultural meanings associated with betel nut popularized betel nut consumption. Economic change was one pushing force but, the symbolic meanings of betel nut, such as creating socialability, were key to maintaining and even expanding its popularity. Nevertheless, despite this increasing use, the Qing did not come up with any policies for or against betel nut.

Japanese Rule (1895-1945)

In 1895, the Japanese took Taiwan from the Qing government. The major principle of Japanese rule in Taiwan, in order to serve Japanese needs, was “agricultural Taiwan, industrial Japan.” This shows that agriculture was an essential focus for Japanese regulation and control in Taiwan. Japanese emphasized rice and sugar as the major agricultural products, although later, tea and bananas were also planted. To the ruling Japanese, since betel nut could not make a profit and they did not consume it, its production was therefore irrelevant and unimportant.

The Japanese did however see betel nut chewing as unhygienic. Before 1920 though, the Japanese emphasis on hygiene and the intention to adjust social customs were mainly implemented in the cities. After 1920, according to Zhu (2000), increasing numbers of Japanese started to be concerned that this bad social custom would eventually influence their ruled people biologically over time (*ibid.*: 327). Zhu (2000) explains that this may be why the Japanese started to control betel nut chewing more strictly and later even expanded such control to rural areas after 1920. After 1940, the Japanese forcefully began to prohibit the planting and chewing of betel nut.

In fact, connecting betel nut chewing with being unhygienic is still an essential perception among Taiwanese today. This is despite its earlier strong association with

maintaining *good* health. Zhu (2000) asserts that Taiwanese elites' and intellectuals' strong dislike for betel nut chewing as a "backward" and "unhygienic" custom came from this Japanese ruling period.

I want to highlight two points here. The first is that the reason betel nut chewing rates decreased was less directly related to economic factors during the Japanese rule. It was more the Japanese elite's assertion of cultural ideas of cleanliness, which accompanied the Taiwanese colonial economic transformation that decreased the chewing of betel nut. Secondly, it is important to emphasize the state's political intervention in relation to betel nut consumption. The Japanese ruling period was the first time that the government controlled betel nut usage with its official power. Unlike the Qing government which took an inactive attitude, the Japanese were very actively involved in decreasing betel nut consumption since they saw its consumption as a threat to their health and cultivating it was not part of their goal for ruling Taiwan.

Post World War II (1945-1970)

During and after World War II, Taiwan's economy collapsed as Taiwan had been a part of Japan and Japan had lost the war. Much of its infrastructure was destroyed by U.S. bombing campaigns. Most people were very poor and many had trouble feeding themselves. At this time, betel nut was an unnecessary luxury and very few people chewed it.

After the war, when the KMT (Guomingdang) government took over ruling Taiwan from the Japanese; they first had to restore agricultural production. In addition to basic foods to feed people, they also encouraged the production of agricultural products that could be exported to bring in foreign currency. During the 1960s,

“exports of agricultural goods and processed food to foreign markets earned Taiwan a great deal in the way of foreign exchange and agricultural profits” (Wu and Winkler 2005:223). Although a small amount of betel nut exporting did occur, overall betel nut production was very low. In fact, one female informant told me that she remembered during this time, her family left only a few betel palms for her grandmother’s personal use. All the farm space available on her family land was used for banana planting. She said that bananas, also called “yellow gold” in Taiwan, were exported to Japan and farmers made good profits from them.

The KMT did not prohibit betel nut chewing as the Japanese had. At the same time though, most Taiwanese could not afford it anyway. I do not intend to claim that Taiwanese during this time did not consume betel nut *only* because they were too poor to consume it. Many people who were the major source of labor in the post-war Taiwan had also received Japanese education. As mentioned above, they tended to think of betel nut chewing as unhygienic and backward and therefore rejected it. What I mean here is that poverty was one of the reasons for a decrease in betel nut consumption, but not the only determining factor.

Betel nut, after the war but before the 1970s, was only used for special occasions, such as hosting wedding guests (Wang *et al.* 1997). It was not a daily life habit. There was little betel nut consumption or production. The KMT betel nut policy, called the “Three No Policy”—no encouragement, no guidance, and no prohibition—however, provided betel nut consumption (and production) the possibility of being revived after the seventies.¹⁶ In other words, KMT rulers took a negative, instead of positive, role in relation to betel nut production, which allowed the possibility of rapid

¹⁶ The Chinese phrase is “*bu guli, bu fudao, bu jinzhi*” (不鼓勵，不輔導，不禁止).

popularization betel nut consumption. Since the official attitude was *not* to prohibit it, when betel nut consumption increased, there was little official intervention to stop it.

1970 to the Present

The return of betel nut during this period then occurred in a very different context than that of its previous period of popularity at the end of Qing rule. After 1970, Taiwan started to rapidly industrialize and was incorporated into the world system. The need for transportation labor and construction workers increased rapidly and this provided the potential consumers to bring betel nut back to daily life (Li 2004). There were jobs available and money to be made as long as you could work long and hard enough.

Betel nut consumption grew dramatically after the 1970s. In the beginning, the primary betel nut consumers were drivers and construction workers. “Manual transport jobs” were the fastest growing jobs from 1953 to 2001, according to government statistics. When drivers have to drive overnight to transport goods all over the island, betel nut helps to keep them awake and less tired. This is why in contemporary Taiwan there are many betel nut shops on the roadsides and especially near the exit ramps of highways.

In fact, I have had personal experience with this. Several years ago, I was in an aboriginal community in Nantou (in southern Taiwan) and I had to go back to Taipei all of a sudden. Therefore, my aborigine friend asked his friend, who was a fruit delivery truck driver, to give me a ride to downtown Nantou from where I could take the bus home. The truck driver, though, was willing to give me a ride all the way to Taipei since it was his final destination. He started the “trip” at about 9:00 at night in Nantou. We arrived in Taipei at about 5:00 in the morning. During the trip, he almost

never stopped chewing betel nuts, especially when he was responsible for driving (he was one of a three person team). He told me that there was no way one could drive all night and not fall asleep without chewing betel nut.

During this new rise of betel nut consumption, manual workers consumed it for its stimulant and energizing effects in order to work longer. Since then, betel nut has been strongly linked with the image of blue-collar workers. In other words, one of the main pushing forces to popularize betel nut consumption after the 1970s was the context of rapid industrialization in Taiwan. One necessity for industrialization is the ability to transport goods from one place to another, and moreover providing larger amounts of cheap labor is one of the most important factors in industrialization. Both of these were also essential elements in the popularization of betel nut consumption.

Meanwhile, from the production side, it is worth noting that “the government actively supported industry at the cost of agriculture and young people began moving from agricultural villages to work in these newly developing industries” (Wu and Winkler 2005:223). In this sense, the rural areas started to face a shortage of labor and therefore, they needed to grow something with low labor requirements. Betel nut is one such low labor plant.

As mentioned before, one important function of betel nut was to host guests. In fact, some places in southern Taiwan still have the custom of giving betel nut to host guests at wedding banquets today. Betel nut and cigarettes are also used by men in their regular social interaction among themselves. Men give betel nut to each other whenever they see each other. Whether for friends visiting or for business occasions betel nut again became a key symbol in social interaction. It created closeness and showed hospitality. Chen Ruiyi (1995) states that 87.4 percent of betel nut consumers often consume betel nut together with friends or relatives. According to many

informants, it is very hard not to chew betel nut because people give it to you and rejecting it makes the giver lose face.

Another occasion for consuming betel nut is during elections. The journalist Qiu Huamei (1999) reports that betel nut selling increases from 10 to 20 percent during elections. One informant who is an elected village head told me that, as a local politician, he has to prepare betel nut and cigarettes in his campaign office to host his voters. He told me,

When people (male voters) come to talk to me, as soon as they walk into my office, I shake their hand first, ask them to sit down, and then give them a cigarette and betel nut. Then we smoke and chew betel nut together.

He said, at least in southern Taiwan and in the countryside, it is necessary to do so. Lai Shuji (1997) reports that about one third of Taiwan's legislators have betel nut chewing experience and that it is more popular in the south. She reports that legislators think it is the best way to gain identification with grassroots society.

After the 70's, specialized betel nut shops gradually emerged. People began to consistently buy betel nut from the shops instead of processing it by themselves. Although during the Qing period, betel nut was sold on the market, people still processed it into betel quid by themselves. In fact, most people chewed the nuts that they planted instead of buying it from the market. In contemporary times, however, the production and consumption have been separated completely. I met both a betel nut farmer and a betel nut distributor buying betel nut in a retail shop even though they have thousands of betel palms (the farmers) and betel nut (the distributors) at their own homes. Betel nut then became even more commercialized after the 1970s. During the 1990s, due to increased competition between shops, betel nut beauties emerged (shops hiring scantily dressed young women to sell betel nut) and this

phenomenon made betel nut consumption even more controversial because it added erotic connotations to the cultural meaning.

Following the “Three No Policy,” the Taiwan government did not take any further action until the mid 1990s. At this time, however, there were an increasing number of anti-betel nut campaigns motivated by public health concerns in addition to an increase in state policy-making on betel nut. Many of these campaigns have been dominated by the influence of the bio-medical discourse. I will go into detail about this and various other important anti-betel nut discourses in Chapter 2. Here I only want to highlight one point: though there were some policies regulating betel nut consumption and production, the actual result was limited in its effect in relation to controlling betel nut. Furthermore, neither the KMT dictatorship nor later democratic governments have cracked down on betel nut chewing in Taiwan.

The Economy and the State Transformation

It is important to locate betel nut consumption in the context of economic transformation in Taiwan. At the same time, I do not mean to claim that economic determination fully explains betel nut consumption. While economy is a pushing force to transform the popularity of betel nut consumption from one stage to the other, the cultural and symbolic meanings of betel nut consumption have been the keys to maintaining and expanding its popularity.

Moreover, these economic factors need to be examined together with the changes in state power. For example, although during both the post-World War II and post-1970s periods, Taiwan was under the same government, we must take note of differences in the degree of state control at each time. The former period was under the KMT dictatorship, while the latter one has been the period of Taiwan's

transformation to a more democratic political system. As Taiwan moved toward the so-called “Taiwanese Economic Miracle” period, challenges to the KMT dictatorship continued to grow; especially building up to 1987 when Chiang Ching-kuo (蔣經國) lifted Martial Law which had been proclaimed in 1947. Therefore, the significant transformations of betel nut usage through time, to a certain degree, also reflect the importance of how the ruling power (or nation state) influenced betel nut usage and its cultural meanings. In this sense, the history of betel nut consumption reveals an arena of contestation between consumers, elites, and state policy.

Finally, the cultural meanings of its consumption also change through different economic activities and politics. For example, people originally chewed betel nut for medical purposes, hosting guests, pacifying conflicts, and creating groups, yet now people consume it mainly for its stimulant effect and for its role in sociability (at gatherings of friends, for doing business, or running in elections). Another example is that betel nut was originally thought of as a positive medicinal material, yet now it has become a morally controversial substance. In other words, economic and cultural factors both play roles in the popularization of betel nut consumption and these factors actually influence each other. In order to understand the popularization of a substance, it is essential to identify what these factors do and how they mutually influence each other.

Selling Betel Nut in Contemporary Taiwan

Betel Nut Production

If you happened to fly to Taiwan via the Kaohsiung International Airport in the south, instead of via Taipei, you could ride a motorcycle from the airport to the southernmost county of Taiwan—Pingdong County. Riding on Route No. 27, as soon

as you leave the urban area, you will see thousands of betel palm trees lining the road. In fact, Pingdong used to be the largest betel nut planting area for a long time and now is the second largest one, second only to Nantou. However, the profitability of Pingdong betel nut remains the highest in Taiwan because it starts to harvest before other planting areas. In May, when all the other planting areas stop harvesting from the previous year, Pingdong starts its new year's harvest because its geographic location and weather allow Pingdong's betel nut to ripen earlier. This is why Pingdong farmers see betel nut as "green gold." Wang *et al.* indicates, "from 1977-1992, betel nut planting areas increased 50 times in Pingdong" (1997:121).

For people like me who grew up in an urban area, it is a bit difficult to distinguish between three common types of palm trees: banana, coconut, and betel nut trees. All three are very common plants in southern Taiwan. The easiest way to differentiate them is that the betel palm is much thinner and shorter than the coconut palm, yet taller than a banana tree. In addition to betel palm farms, the keen observer will notice that some farmers plant betel palms along the boundary of their farm. One traditional function of the betel palm, both in the past and now, was for marking land boundaries. In the seventies, before betel nut became such an important cash crop, the trees were mainly planted around the fields, hardly ever in rows within them.

As mentioned, betel nut planting increased rapidly. In addition to filling consumption needs, it is important to locate betel nut production in the context of Taiwan's economic development. In order to have industrial development, Taiwan's government policy chose to "sacrifice" agriculture. Thousands of young people, both men and women, were pulled to the big cities to work in factories. Only older people stayed behind in the rural areas. The planting area has increased 35 times from 1972 to 1998 (see Figure 1), due to "betel nut planting's low labor requirement, high

profitability, increasing wages in rural areas, and the agricultural policy for transforming rice planting to other products” (Fu and Huang 1999:115).

In fact, as Taiwan’s position in the world system changed, Taiwanese farmers have had very little choice—they had to grow agricultural products with low labor requirements and high profit. Fu and Huang (1999) indicate that every NT dollar spent on betel nut production could give farmers two to three dollars of profit in 1995.

Year	Planted Area (ha)	Production Amount (m.t.)	Value (in thousands of NTD)
1972	1,597	12,281	69,767
1973	1,474	10,344	69,350
1974	1,685	13,612	110,091
1975	1,735	14,554	137,633
1976	1,878	15,997	140,788
1977	2,110	16,961	186,674
1978	2,448	21,373	301,086
1979	2,840	17,531	262,929
1980	3,354	19,959	414,447
1981	4,100	24,385	694,461
1982	4,428	27,024	810,720
1983	5,772	30,102	1,664,641
1984	6,936	36,687	1,926,068
1985	8,902	55,723	2,981,181
1986	11,061	61,394	3,376,670
1987	15,521	61,414	3,991,910
1988	24,266	91,986	6,255,048
1989	33,487	107,563	7,368,066
1990	35,760	104,473	7,522,056
1991	39,659	111,090	8,887,200
1992	41,535	115,348	8,077,860
1993	44,671	137,467	10,310,024
1994	47,203	132,208	11,237,680
1995	54,346	156,108	13,269,180
1996	56,581	160,118	13,610,030
1997	56,542	156,207	13,277,595
1998	56,111	172,574	14,151,068
1999	56,593	170,039	13,943,198
2000	55,601	166,975	13,775,438
2001	54,005	165,076	13,206,057
2002	53,272	162,253	*

*Not available

Source: Taiwan Agricultural Year Book 2003

Figure 1: The Production Area, Amounts, and Value of Betel Nut From 1972-2002

“Unlike other agricultural products, betel nut farmers can sell out all their betel nuts. It is just that how much profit they can earn varies month by month. There is no

obvious unsellable portion in betel nut production” (Fu and Huang 1999:121). As mentioned, May through June was the shortage time because only Pingdong provided betel nut for the whole island. Therefore, the price of betel nut changes depending on different months within each year. As Taiwanese prefer to chew fresh betel nut, preserved betel nut only existed in the past when there was not enough year round production. Since the amount of betel nut production and the harvest times are determined by temperature and altitude, different areas on Taiwan have different harvest times and therefore create periodic price changes for betel nut.

The annual value of betel nut production was NT 69.8 million dollars in 1972, but was NT 14.2 billion dollars by 1998. Although the value decreased a little bit after 1998 (attributed to too much supply), its annual value is still quite high and in 2001, it was worth NT 13.2 billion dollars. Despite it being only a single agricultural product, “betel nut has been one of the most important factors in developing the agricultural economy” in rural Taiwan (Fu and Huang 1999: 113).

Betel Nut Shops

Betel nut stands are a typical small business in Taiwan. In the past, betel nut stands were often a single table in a bigger shop like a traditional grocery store. Specialized betel nut stands gradually appeared in the 80s. There are an estimated 500,000 betel nut stands on Taiwan now. Most of them are not registered and many of them occupy public space for their private use. In general, there are fewer betel nut shops in the center of cities.

There are many kinds of betel nut stands. Some are bigger and elaborate and others are smaller and mainly for temporary use. Some are regular shops, and others glass booths, or just a table. In contemporary Taiwan, when people think about betel

nut shops, they often refer to the glass booth style because it is most associated with betel nut beauties. Glass booths look like the display windows of a department store. They have a cubical form and are usually located on the roadside. All four sides are made of glass. People who walk or drive by can see straight through the stands. This type of shop is often decorated with neon lights which allow people to see them better at night. The intention of glass booth shops is to allow people to watch the betel nut beauty, sitting on a high stool with her legs crossed in order to increase leg exposure. The betel nut beauty will often be seen preparing betel nut, talking on the phone or even standing up, facing you, and dancing in order to entice betel nut consumers to stop at her shop instead of others. In this sense, the betel nut beauty adds erotic meaning into betel nut consumption. A betel nut stand, visually, is not just a shop. It is a place which sparkles with neon lights at night where a scantily dressed young woman stands waiting and beckoning. This is one of the most significant landscapes in contemporary Taiwan and it is unique to Taiwan.

This visual eroticism of the betel nut shop is very important in relation to understanding why many Taiwanese argue against betel nut consumption. Most Taiwanese see the existence of such shops as a “visible national shame”—the shop with its sexual image is so prominent in Taiwan’s landscape that all foreign visitors can see it as soon as they arrive in Taiwan. Many Taiwanese are upset about it because it makes Taiwan look more like a sex playground rather than fitting their ideal of being a “civilized country.” This is also why many people often link betel nut shops with prostitution and sometimes with drugs. Nevertheless, most betel nut shops, even though there may be several women dressed erotically inside, are regular shops that sell betel nut, drinks (both soft drinks and alcohol), and cigarettes, not sex or cocaine.

Betel nut beauty shops are not distributed evenly in Taiwan. They are usually concentrated in certain areas to form clusters (Zhuang 1999). In addition, there are many fewer betel nut beauty shops in urban areas, especially Taipei city. Zhuang (1999) indicates that particularly in urban areas, there are many shops run by men.

Betel nut stands are also a typical family business in Taiwan. As with many other Taiwanese family businesses, the people who take care of the shop can be women or men, young or old, as long as they are family members. Some anthropologists such as Hill Gates (1987) and Susan Greenhalgh (1994) describe how female labor is exploited within the family business to make profit. Due to the increasing competition between betel nut shops, shops began hiring young women who were not family members in the 1980s. This trend is very quickly spreading all over the island and some shop owners now think it is more profitable to hire someone selling betel nut instead of using the “free” labor provided by family members. For example, an attractive betel nut beauty might earn more money for the shop than the owner selling betel nut by himself or herself.

Betel Nut Beauties

Imagine you are sitting on the bus that connects the airport with Taipei city in north Taiwan. What you can see from the highway are green fields guarded by several continuous small hills and interrupted by small, iron-roofed factories spread haphazardly around. As soon as the bus exits the highway, suddenly you see young women sitting on high stools in glass booths on the roadside. Some of them dress “scantily,” especially in areas near highway exit ramps or on certain roads where many truck drivers pass. How “scantily” do they dress, you may wonder. In some

cases, they may only wear bras and panties although, especially before 2002, there were often many rumors circulating that some wear nothing at all.¹⁷

People call these young women betel nut sellers “betel nut beauties,” or “*binglang xishi*” in Mandarin. Not everyone who sells betel nut is female however, now or in the past. As mentioned, there are many male betel nut sellers, particularly in urban areas. Nevertheless, when people say “betel nut beauty,” it refers to women, particularly “young” women who dress “sexily” to sell betel nut. Therefore, middle-aged women or who dress conservatively to sell betel nut do not count as “betel nut beauties” in Taiwan. What, however, are the visible criteria to decide whether a female seller is “young” or “scantily dressed” and therefore a betel nut beauty? This is a bit hard to answer. Some people say that the “real” betel nut beauties do not just dress scantily. Instead, the “real” ones dress according to certain themes, such as wearing nurse’s or high school uniforms. Their clothes are more like a costume style. Other people think that as long as a female betel nut seller dresses “sexily,” then she is a betel nut beauty. Thus, whether a female betel nut seller is considered a betel nut beauty or not is a subjective judgment. It depends on the watcher’s eye or on the seller herself thinking she is a betel nut beauty.

Betel nut beauties are a new phenomenon that started in the nineties. Due to competitive tension between betel nut stands, some shop owners started this idea of hiring young women to dress sexily and sell betel nut. Some people even “blame” the existence of betel nut beauties for “promoting” betel nut consumption. This argument is problematic, however, on two fronts. First, this tends to result from people confusing the timing. Betel nut beauties appeared only in the 1990s, well after the beginning of increases in consumption in the 1970s.

¹⁷ In 2002, Taoyuan County passed a new law to fine betel nut beauties who wear too little. The fine is up to NT 6,000 dollars. Taoyuan County promoted this new policy as a new “Three No Policy”—no exposure of breasts, bellies, or buttocks (Boudreau 2002).

Second, during my fieldwork, I found that betel nut users tend to buy betel nut from certain regular shops because each shop's betel nut tastes different. Betel nut chewing, to a certain degree, is similar to smoking cigarettes. That is to say, once you get used to one brand, you do not change it. Even betel nut chain stores cannot guarantee all their shops' betel nut will taste exactly the same in spite of using exactly the same ingredients. Some of my informants did tell me that they might stop at a shop because they think the betel nut beauty is pretty. Yet, they usually do not buy betel nut from her. They buy cigarettes or drinks instead.

I said earlier that one reason people argue against betel nut consumption is because they link betel nut beauties with prostitution. This makes betel nut consumption immoral. Although people often link betel nut beauties with erotic services, it is important to point out that such "beauties" are not unique to betel nut. There is a long history in many places in the world of using the female body to sell products, from showgirls in car exhibitions to beer girls in clubs. Yet, people in Taiwan more often link betel nut with negative images than these other kinds of "beauty selling" jobs such as fashion modeling. Why is this? Why is a scantily dressed international brand name underwear model *not* seen as erotic and distasteful, while a betel nut beauty, who might dress exactly the same way, is seen as both overly erotic and distasteful?

In reality, some betel nut beauties do provide extra services such as kissing, touching, or in some cases, sexual services. The majority of betel nut beauties however, just sell regular betel nut—that is, they sell betel nut, not sex or erotic "extras." This still does not make them that different from models. Tabloids constantly print rumors about rich people paying money to invite a model to have

dinner with or even sleep with them. However, betel nut beauties are still seen as much more immoral than models.

Maybe what makes using the female body to sell something moral or immoral has less to do with whether she dresses scantily and more to do with who her customers are and the class status of this service. It is worth emphasizing that employing betel nut beauties is one of the many ways that betel nut shop owners have invented to increase their betel nut sales. This way does not guarantee a successful increase, though, just as with many other ways of promotions. Nevertheless, it needs to be kept in mind that many Taiwanese see the betel nut beauty as immoral, a quasi-prostitute, and as the one to blame for increasing betel nut consumption and for making Taiwan look like a sexual playground.

On the contrary, the existence of betel nut beauties may actually be one reason that Taiwan retains a relatively low unemployment rate despite most manufacturing factories moving to China in the 90s. Qiu (1999) points out that betel nut beauty jobs provide girls who only have junior high school degrees or lower not only job opportunities, but also a relatively high salary, higher than their counterparts who may work as waitresses in restaurants. The rising need for betel nut beauties thus also provides an increase in low skilled job opportunities for women.¹⁸

Objectives and Significance of Researching Betel Nut Consumption in Taiwan

Betel nut consumption is one of the most controversial kinds of consumption in Taiwan. Betel nut is seen as a national symbol in Taiwan; it is a symbol of Taiwan even for people who strongly argue against it. In addition, the high popularity of its

¹⁸ Qiu discusses not only women but also men. She thinks the rising need for *bajiajiang* members (八家將, characters mainly played by young men in ritual occasions) provides low-skill males with additional job opportunities.

consumption today also makes outsiders (people outside Taiwan) link betel nut with Taiwan.

At the same time, most Taiwanese do not see it as an honorable national symbol. Taiwanese do not feel proud of it. Betel nut chewing to most Taiwanese is an embarrassing national symbol. The increase in popularity is a puzzle to them. They do not understand why, as Taiwan has become more modern, more developed, and more cosmopolitan, this embarrassing symbol has become more prominent. People do not understand why there is this contradicting combination of “civilization and the primitive.” To many of them, the more important issue is how to eliminate betel nut consumption and how long it will take. They expect that it one day will disappear or, at least, no longer be significant, thereby making Taiwan a “truly” modern, developed, and cosmopolitan place.

This kind of modern paradox is not unique to Taiwan. Why is there an increasing demand for teaching creationism in America despite America being a super power in technology and science? Isn't America more modern than before? Why doesn't shamanism disappear in international, cosmopolitan, and modern cities like Hong Kong? Why is there a contradiction between modernity and some embarrassing puzzles? The study of betel nut consumption in Taiwan is a case study for understanding modern paradoxes and modernity itself. My intention is to reveal and identify the cultural logic for this modern paradox. In other words, the significance of this research lays not just in the area of Taiwan Studies. Instead, it is an intention to solve a modern puzzle. For people interested in the nature of modernity, especially the contradictions within it, this study provides an ethnographic and contextualized example.

I separate my arguments into six Chapters in this study. From here, I will move to an ethnographic discussion of who betel nut consumers are and how mainstream discourse sees betel nut consumption in Chapter 2. I will also analyze how different discourses contest betel nut consumption.

In Chapter 3, 4, and 5, I will start to solve this Taiwan betel nut puzzle through the frameworks of gender, class, and social identity. I will identify the gender related aspects of betel nut consumption in Chapter 3. In this chapter, I will analyze why Taiwanese men and not women, consume betel nut and how betel nut chewing is related to masculinity in Taiwan. Chapter 4 focuses on how class is contested and enacted in betel nut consumption. In Chapter 5, I will discuss how betel nut consumption is related to ethnicity. How do people link ethnicity to betel nut chewing and what are the cultural meanings of this linkage in the context of Taiwan's identity politics? More importantly, how does the idea of social identity link to the cultural idea of class in Taiwan? These three chapters will identify the key elements of betel nut consumption in Taiwan's context. In Chapter 6, through the concept of cultural intimacy (Herzfeld 2005), I will bring together observations on gender, class, and social identity to explain why there is increasing betel nut consumption despite most Taiwanese seeing it as a "backward" and embarrassing national symbol.

Chapter 2: Betel Nut Consumption as Contested Discourse

Meeting Betel Nut Consumers: Fieldwork at the Garden

The Betel Nut Shop and Its Owners

Thau-ke, the co-owner of the Garden (pseudonym) betel nut shop, is a man in his thirties. He always wears a loose T-shirt or white vest undershirt and a pair of loose jeans. His favorite shoes are clogs¹⁹ and he wears tennis shoes as well, but never leather shoes. He said that he and his wife are country people doing small business so (of course), he does not need to wear leather shoes. His clothing style is typical for non white-collar workers in Taiwan.

He also always wears a thick gold necklace, which is also quite common in the countryside and among manual laborers in cities, but is criticized as tasteless by middle class people. He has three big tattoos, one on each arm and one on his leg. Tattoos are also quite common among men in southern Taiwan and among manual laborers in the cities. To Thau-ke, having a tattoo is a symbol of masculinity, but to middle class urban residents it is simply a symbol of being a gangster. Although Thau-ke has tattoos and he often bragged in front of me about his past “gangster” experience (mainly helping his “real gangster” friend to ask people to pay their debts), now he spends his entire day and evenings playing on-line games or processing betel nut at the Garden.

Whenever I talked to Thau-ke, except when he was eating, he was chewing betel nut. Thau-ke told me he became a regular chewer after he opened the shop. I estimate that he chews about forty betel nuts per day. As a result of this, he had red

¹⁹ This is a traditional Taiwanese wooden sandal that was modified from Japanese style clogs, named “muji”(木屐).

stains on his teeth and lips which seem to be permanent. His face is now more in the shape of a square although, from his wedding picture, it used to look more like an upside-down triangle. He told me this change is because he has chewed betel nut for such a long time. All regular betel nut chewers have more square cheek structure because the muscles in their cheeks have been “exercised” so much. To most people, and especially to Taiwanese women, a square-type face is a less attractive facial shape.

When we talked, we always mixed Mandarin and Holo because, as he said, he did not perform well in school so therefore his Mandarin is bad. In Taiwan, Mandarin is the official language used throughout the educational system. Languages other than Mandarin used to be prohibited in schools. Students in Thau-ke’s time would have been punished for speaking their mother tongues even if they only spoke to each other during class breaks. Although languages other than Mandarin are taught in school in a “native language course” today and students are not punished for speaking their mother tongues, the instructional language for all other courses is still Mandarin. Thau-ke told me he felt much closer with people if they spoke Holo to each other. Despite this, I noticed his children only speak Mandarin and he and his wife speak Mandarin with them. When I asked them why, they told me it is because Mandarin is harder to learn (most non-native Chinese speakers learning Mandarin and Holo would disagree) and they wanted to make sure their children speak good Mandarin, unlike Thau-ke. Thau-ke said Mandarin skills are more important for finding better jobs in the future. He said, “You know, the kind of jobs that people only need to sit in the office and use their ‘brain’ for, instead of manual labor.”

Thau-ke’s wife and the other co-owner of the Garden, Thau-ke-niu, is also in her thirties. To a certain degree, she is the “real” owner since she started the business and her husband only joined her later on once the business started going well. She

always wears a tight dress or a miniskirt and a close-fitting shirt. What surprised me most is that she wears high-heel shoes—about three inches high—at least 12 hours a day. Many people who see her might think she is a “betel nut beauty.” I myself asked her if she thought she was one. She said, no, she is the “*thau-ke-niu* (頭家娘).” *Thau-ke-niu* is a Holo term which literally means the “boss’s wife.” Research on Taiwanese small business has told us, however, that *thau-ke-niu* is not just a “boss’s wife” (Gao 1999). In many family businesses, the *thau-ke-niu* plays a central role in running the business. In this particular case, she is the one who started the business and has contact with customers every day. She also did more betel nut processing than her husband and she was the one who taught her husband how to process betel nut. Even Thau-ke once joked to me that Thau-ke-niu was the breadwinner in the family. There is then a good underlying reason she claimed not to be a betel nut beauty: she sees herself as a boss, not an employee. Nevertheless, Thau-ke-niu told me the reason she is not a betel nut beauty is because she just wore pretty clothes, not “spicy” ones. “Spicy” is a common description in Taiwan used to describe women who are sexy, or “hot.” This description came from the famous UK female singing group the Spice Girls. Thau-ke-niu thought betel nut beauties were scantily clad young women, not mothers of three children who only dress “pretty” instead of “spicy.”

Before she took her children home from the shop in the evenings (the children would hang out for a while at the Garden after school), she would change out of her high-heel shoes. It was almost like a ritual to mark her role change from the co-owner of the shop to a mother, and a ritual for separating business time and private time. Thau-ke-niu and Thau-ke have three children—one three years old and two in elementary school. Thau-ke told me that unlike people in the cities who may only

want one, or at most two children, they are more “traditional” and wanted to have more.

They have run the shop for nine years now. It is open from seven in the morning to midnight, seven days a week. In the daytime, both Thau-ke and Thau-ke-niu stay at the shop, especially now that Thau-ke is addicted to on-line gaming. He used to not stay in the shop as much because previously he enjoyed gambling too much. After seven at night, only Thau-ke takes care of the shop. Nighttime is when the shop is “hot and noisy”²⁰ because a group of Thau-ke’s friends stop by to hang out. They come to watch TV, play on-line games, drink beer, and just chat. All of them are men and most of them chew betel nut.

Research Methods

The Garden was my major fieldsite. I did my participant observation there from May to August 2005. I met most of my informants there. I spent each night at the Garden cutting the tops and bottoms off betel nut, getting to know people, and chatting with them. There are both advantages and disadvantages in being a woman doing fieldwork among men. Being a woman, I have a structural disadvantage in truly being friends with them. For example, during several social occasions, some of my some male informants had their wives or girlfriends with them. These women tended to be very quiet and inactive, not interacting with other people unless there were more than two women. Then they might talk to each other. Furthermore, my (male) informants told me that other men are not supposed to talk to these women directly and actively because that would make the man who brought her there lose face and it would cause tension between the men (meaning the man who accompanied the girl

²⁰ Shuenn-der Yu (2004:132) translated the Chinese term “*renao*” as “hot and noisy” when he described night market culture in Taiwan. I have borrowed the translation from him.

would get jealous and be suspicious that other men intended to pick her up). However, since I was not with anyone there I was able, to a certain degree, to escape this constraint. I could talk freely to other men without worrying about causing such tensions. In addition, being a Taipei woman allowed me to actively talk since they all assumed that Taipei women are more “open.” It thus is “natural” for Taipei women to be more actively involved in male conversation.

Most important of all, being a postgraduate student doing research among working class men—meaning there was a significant difference in educational level, something Taiwanese in general give more respect to—earned me a chance to act differently from other women in our daily interactions. Being introduced as a Master’s student to new people by Thau-ke combined with the very fact that I did not act as they might expect a woman “should,” gave me a relatively neutral ground on which to approach friendships and gender identities. If I were a man however, it might be quicker for me to be friends with them in the beginning. Yet a male anthropologist might cause more tension due to his different class position based on educational degree. In other words, if I were a man, it might make my male informants feel I was in a higher social position looking down on them. This issue of social hierarchy would also lead to different consequences and thus biases. In my case, although I am a Taiwanese woman, they do not treat me how they treat other women in their daily life because I am twice an outsider, being both from Taipei and a postgraduate student. On the other hand, this difference in educational level would not give them too much pressure since, to them, I am still a woman.

In addition to participant observation with its frequent informal conversations, I conducted 22 in-depth interviews which included both betel nut users and non-users of both sexes. There were totally 3 women and 19 men. None of the women chewed

betel nut and five of nineteen men also did not currently chew betel nut regularly. I have included a list of the questions I asked in Appendix 1.

The questions I asked in these interviews were all open-ended. I asked in Mandarin and they answered in Holo, Mandarin, or a mix of the two. My daily conversations with them however, consisted of a mix of Holo and Mandarin. While my first language is Mandarin, I understand Holo, just like many other people who grew up in Taipei. To my informants, being a Taipei person, no matter if they are native Taiwanese or mainlanders, means being unable to speak Holo fluently. Furthermore, although by an objective standard, I count as a second-generation mainlander based on Taiwan's identity politics, this is not how I identity myself. My parents were both born in Korea as overseas Chinese. They migrated to Taiwan before I was born and I grew up in Taipei. If I had to choose one identity—I find this is often a difficult issue for anthropologist—I would claim to be a Taipei woman (*taibeiren* 台北人). Nevertheless, this ambiguous identification allowed me to be both an insider and an outsider in my fieldwork. I could observe them as an outsider, my urban background in contrast with their rural background, my mainlander in contrast with their native Taiwanese background. Yet, meanwhile, I was also an insider since I grew up in Taiwan and, to a large degree, share collective memories with them from being Taiwanese.

The Garden is in Pingdong City, the capital of Pingdong County. Pingdong is an agriculturally based county in southern Taiwan. Betel nut and wax apples²¹ are the two major cash crops, in addition to rice, at present in Pingdong. As mentioned in Chapter 1, betel nut production in Pingdong has the highest value for all regions of Taiwan. I happened to be in the field during the shortage time for betel nut production;

²¹ Other common names for wax apple are water apple, java apple or bell fruit. It is cultivated in tropical regions. In Taiwan, it is called "*lianwu*" (蓮霧).

the prices were high, and Pingdong was the only provider of betel nut for the whole island. Over the course of the summer, I witnessed the price changing rapidly as other regions also began to harvest.

Although technically the Garden is in Pingdong City, it actually is located on a road that connects Pingdong city, through Wandan, to Donggang—two townships to the south. There is a four lane paved road in front of the Garden. The Garden is thus not in downtown Pingdong City, but is located in an area between city and village. While Wandan is a quiet agricultural town, Donggang further down on the road is a fishing town and a famous tourist site. There are therefore, many trucks and tourists' private cars using this road to go to Donggang, especially from May through July when the Blue Fin Tuna festival is going on.²² Near the Garden, instead of farms, apartments line the sides of the road. These apartments are in typical southern Taiwan style, which means a four-story building made of cement with the first floor given over for business. On the right side of the Garden, there is a car repair and used-car shop, on the left side is a small piece of spare land, and there is a telephone engineering company across the street. Many workers from both companies hang out either in their company or in the Garden after work.

The Garden is a great site for betel nut consumption research because there are actually betel nut consumers hanging out there. In Taiwan, most betel nut consumers drive by such shops to buy betel nut and then quickly leave. They do not stick around and have no time for anthropologists. The Garden however, has betel nut users hanging out there partly because of the location and partly because of Thau-ke's personality. This situation allowed me to build rapport with them on a day-to-day basis and to maintain long-term relations. Several of my key informants show up at

²² Donggang used to be a quiet and unknown fishing village, just like many other fishing villages. After the first Blue-Fin-Tuna festival was held in 2002, however, it then made Donggang famous through out Taiwan. Ever since this first one, many tourists go to Donggang during the festival.

the Garden every night. Maybe one reason they come “every” night is that they are not currently in a marriage relationship.

Seeing Betel Nut Consumers: Informants in Taiwan’s Context

I am going to introduce my key informants here to show who they are before I examine who they become based on mainstream discourses. Through ethnographic description of betel nut consumers, I will also use their stories to bring up some important elements of Taiwan’s cultural and social context upon which later chapters will build.

A-Xiu is a 26-year-old single man who has never been married and who lives alone on the second floor of the Garden. His parent’s home is in a nearby village. He works at the car repair company next to the Garden. He works at least eight hours a day although sometimes longer. At the end of my fieldwork, he was thinking about quitting because he wanted to have a new environment. Other people told me, however, that he wanted to quit because he wanted to meet girls. Now, he is either working or at the Garden, and neither place is one where girls hang out. He has chewed betel nut for about eight years. Since A-Xiu fixes cars, his clothes are always dirty and often have black oil stains on them. In addition, he often spit betel juice on the road and did not clean up the betel stains on his lips. He once told me that men in southern Taiwan care less about appearance, unlike men in the north. His words imply that northern Taiwanese men are better at hiding or covering who they are and therefore are not as sincere as southern Taiwanese men. He has a high school degree, yet he thinks studying is useless and making money is much more practical. He said, Taiwan is a money-oriented society. His dream is that one day he might migrate to “America’s Canada” because he heard the scenery is beautiful there. I told him that

Canada is its own country, not a part of the United States, but he replied that it did not matter because he could not do it anyway. In Taiwan, migration is generally for rich people. He told me, he voted a “useless vote” for the last presidential election. His father wanted him to vote for Lian Zhan (the KMT candidate) because he had received vote-buying money. Yet, A-Xiu preferred to vote for Chen Shui-bian (of the DPP). His solution was to stamp “yes” to both candidates. While the vote may have been useless, this was his way to satisfy both his father’s expectation and his own preference without being forced to give up on either.

I remember the very first time I met A-Xiu, he asked me if it is true that people in Taipei do not know their neighbors, even if they live in the same place for a long time. I told him it depends, at least my parents know all their neighbors. I did not convince him, apparently, because every time any topic about Taipei came up, he repeated “there is no *renqingwei* in Taipei because they do not even know their neighbors.” All of my informants loved this word “*renqingwei*.” It literally means “human relation taste,” meaning the friendships and closeness between people who could be neighbors or strangers. All my informants constantly mentioned to me that people in southern Taiwan have more *renqingwei* and are more “grassroots” even though they are not as sophisticated as people in the cities. “Grassroots” or *caogen* in Chinese is a popular term in contemporary Taiwan due to the rise of identity politics. People use it to describe being “native” and “local.” In Taiwan’s context, it specifically refers to being more “Taiwanese” instead of being “Chinese.” More precisely, it is employed to express a stronger cultural identification with Holo, Hakka or aboriginal cultures, instead of mainlander culture. It also contains a sense of *not* being a middle class or urban resident.

A-Yu currently also works in a car repair company somewhere else in the county. He has a junior high school degree. Before he did this job, he drove a truck for his relative delivering seafood from Donggang to Taipei. He told me, during that time, he had chewed a lot of betel nut. I asked him how much and he said several hundred NT dollars worth of it per day. In Taiwan, one package of betel nut costs 50 NT dollars. When the betel nut price is low, there can be as many as 16 betel nuts in each package. When the price is high however, there are as few as six each.²³ A-Yu wants to start his own seafood business in the future because he really likes seafood. However, he does not have the startup capital. He is 30 years old and has a ten-year-old child. He told me he got married as early as 16 because his girlfriend got pregnant. Then for various reasons they got divorced. He often asked me if I could introduce some girls to him. He told me he is even willing to do all the cooking for her since he loves cooking anyway. He thinks women can continue to work after marriage, but maybe not after having a child. In Taiwan, people often see southern Taiwanese men as more “male chauvinist.” However, one thing worth noting is that this is not only a matter of regional difference. It is a combination of different class and the differences between cities and countryside. Nevertheless, seeing southern Taiwanese men as more “male chauvinist” is not entirely only a stereotype, as I will explore through the idea of masculinity in Chapter 3.

During the weekend, A-Yu often brought seafood to the Garden. We barbecued seafood in the extra space in the shop. He told me he voted for Chen in the last election because he thought Chen is very assertive. A-Yu’s dream is to go to a specific country in Europe where there are 108 islands (although I could not think of a country in Europe with 108 islands myself). Once, when we were watching the TV

²³ These numbers are from my fieldwork in the summer of 2005.

news together and there was a report about the Royal family in the UK, he asked me, “Isn’t the UK democratic yet? Is the UK still a communist country?” I asked him why he thought so. He said, it was because they still have a queen. In Taiwan, the growth of democracy overlaps with the idea of modernity and progress and all are here seen to be the opposite of communism. Therefore, to A-Yu, “having a queen,” meant not being democratic and not being democratic implied they might be a “communist country.” A-Yu did think, however, that the UK was supposed to be a modern country (which therefore should already be democratic), thus giving this contradiction.

A-Wang works in a body shop (for modified cars). He used to chew betel nut but does not anymore. He also came to the Garden every night. When he came to the shop, Thau-ke would let him use the computer. As he currently did not chew betel nut, he came to the shop mainly to play an on-line game and to hang out. He told me he actually quit betel nut quite accidentally. He had some tooth problems before so he had to stop chewing for a while. He then thought, since he had already quit for one week, he might as well take this chance to quit completely, and that was that. However, there was also an underlying motivation for doing so. He has an 11-year-old child and has been divorced for several years. He told me once that chewing betel nut makes people’s cheeks square, which, as I have mentioned, is a less attractive look in Taiwan. In addition, most Taiwanese women dislike betel nut chewing men. I am guessing that the underlying motivation for his quitting was also a girl issue. Except for Thau-ke, they are also all smokers. A-Wang told me that life is not fun if you have to give up all the bad habits. Therefore, even after having given up betel nut, he kept smoking as his “bad” habit to have some enjoyment.

During fieldwork, I met several men who chewed betel nut and had married foreign women or were currently single. An American anthropologist working in

Taiwan told me that marriage is a serious issue in the countryside and among manual laborers in cities. He said, after all, no Taiwanese women would want to marry a man chewing betel nut.²⁴ Taiwanese women do not welcome betel nut chewing, despite Taiwanese men thinking it is more masculine. Here I want to indicate that, while later I will talk of betel nut as a particularly masculine habit, from a woman's perspective, betel nut chewing definitely did not make men more attractive. Meanwhile, I do not mean to imply that no betel nut chewers can find Taiwanese spouses, it is just that betel nut chewing is a negative mark in terms of courting Taiwanese females.

Tiange is a construction worker in his fifties. He has a wife, one unmarried daughter in college and, one married son who all still live with him. He told me that he used to chew several thousand NT dollars worth of betel nut per day (NT 1,000 dollars is US 31.8 dollars now). All the money that he had spent on buying betel nut could buy several houses, he said. When the Taiwanese economy was very good, there were many construction jobs available and he had to chew betel nut to allow himself to work longer. He told me that then the money came too easily and therefore he did not care about spending so much money on consuming betel nut. He said, "do you know I used to earn more than NT 100,000 dollars per month, while an elementary school teacher only earns about NT 40,000 dollars per month?"²⁵ During the 80s, the price of betel nut was very high because the production was not enough. Tiange said, "six hundred grams of eggs could not buy one betel nut." This is a significant comparison to Taiwanese since Taiwan was still an agriculturally based society just before the 60s. Tiange now chews between NT 200 to 300 dollars of betel nut per day. He has had much less work than before since, according to his words, Taiwan's economy has been depressed for more than ten years and therefore there has

²⁴ Thanks to Dr. James Wilkerson for his comment on marriage issues and betel nut consumption.

²⁵ Schoolteachers however, have great social benefits and retirement benefits since most teachers count as "public servants" in Taiwan.

not been as much construction work as before. Tiange did not hang out in the Garden, yet several of his friends came to his house every night to drink tea. It is quite common for a group of men to hang out almost every day after work in southern Taiwan. He told me that he used to always vote DPP since he had some bad experience interacting with mainlanders. Now he did not know if he still supports the DPP however. He said this is because after the DPP obtained power, they did not make Taiwan's economy grow. He said he did not like mainlanders since they oppressed native Taiwanese before, yet the DPP disappointed him since they did not figure out a way to save Taiwan's economy.

My informants are normal Taiwanese men working hard through manual labor, but who do not make enough money to become rich (and therefore are largely unable to migrate to "the West"). They spent most of their time at work, home, or in a semi-private place such as the Garden or someone's home. When they were not working, they spent time hanging out with other men. Many of them are manual laborers and have either junior high school or high school degrees. Their educational level is not high considering the compulsory education system was only nine years while they were in schooling age and more than 99% of Taiwanese are literate today.²⁶ Their educational level is just high enough to be a normal and ordinary Taiwanese. They may not have enough accurate "international knowledge" to be a part of the world's "global village," but they do have access to knowledge of what is happening outside. They are not isolated from either Taiwan or the "global" despite their often describing themselves as "countryside and local people." They are certainly not "peasants" living in the countryside who know nothing about the world that is outside Taiwan. They vote and have their own ideas of who is the best person to be the president of Taiwan.

²⁶ Su, Xiuhui. 2005. *United Daily*, Oct 19. This statistic excludes people over 65 years old.

They maybe do not know much about democracy, but they know they are “modern” enough in the world to be democratic. They like to talk about politics and sex just like many Taiwanese men of higher social status in the cities. Although most people I met in the betel nut shop tended to vote DPP, this does not mean they do not question the DPP’s power. They say they are not as sophisticated as urban people, but believe they are more traditional, grassroots, and have kept the *renqingwei* that most urban people do not have.

Their incomes vary depending on what they do. The Garden makes about NT 80,000 to 100,000 dollars per month. A-Xiu and A-Yu earned about NT 30,000 dollars per month although A-Yu used to earn NT 60,000 dollars while he drove the seafood truck. They are not a part of the lowest income level in Taiwan because consuming betel nut is not cheap. Cigarettes are a cheaper stimulant substance because a pack of the cheapest cigarette costs about NT 50 dollars and all of my informants spent more than that per day on betel nut.

Betel Nut Consumption in Mainstream Discourses

Betel nut consumers and betel nut consumption are often seen to be a target of everything in Taiwan: they are blamed for increasing social costs because of the correlation between betel nut chewing and oral cancer; they are blamed for destroying the natural environment because of the over planting of betel palms especially in mountain areas; they are blamed for corrupting social morality because the existence of betel nut beauties makes Taiwan look like a sex playground; and they are blamed for spoiling Taiwan’s dream to become a modern and cosmopolitan society because betel nut chewing is “backward.” From oral to moral, betel nut consumers and its consumption are blamed on multiple fronts in Taiwanese society. The Taiwanese

government has tried several ways to reduce the number of betel nut consumers, although so far none have had significant success.

In this section, I will examine several different discourses to show how mainstream society sees betel nut consumption. I separate them into four areas: biomedical discourse, cultural survival discourse, environmentalist discourse, and substance abuse discourse. I will show how professionals, elites, middle class, and the nation state construct various discourses to argue against betel nut consumption and its consumers. However, I would also like to highlight the fact that the government does not prohibit betel nut consumption outright. Of course, there are many reasons for this. Since Taiwan is a democratic country, any prohibition that involves interested groups would be very difficult to justify politically. However, these discourses also do not necessarily mean that the nation state truly wants to crack down betel nut consumption anyway. I will refer back to the role of the nation state in relation to social identity issues in more detail in Chapters 5 and 6. It is just worth keeping in mind that from the state's perspective, something about betel nut consumption is closely allied with its own ideology despite government and professionals constructing various discourses to fight against it.

Biomedical Discourse

Betel nut chewing is not unique to Taiwan in the world's context. It is used in Southeast Asia, the South Pacific, and East Africa. Mac Marshall (1987:15) writes that between one-tenth and one-quarter of the world's population have a betel nut chewing habit, which "mak[es] this humanity's fourth most widely used drug after nicotine, ethanol, and caffeine." Yet, the ways of making betel nut do vary depending the areas of the world. Here I will mainly focus on Taiwan.

In Taiwan, most people consume fresh, raw, and unripened betel nut. Other than Taiwan, people in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon islands also consume fresh betel nut (*Wikipedia-Betel Nut*). Most betel nut consuming areas, such as India, the largest such region, consume dried or boiled betel nut.²⁷ Taiwanese name the seed of the betel palm *chhi-a* (菁仔) in Holo, literally meaning “green thing or unripe thing.” The two most popular types of betel quid are *chhi-a* and *pau-hiu-a* (包葉仔, literally meaning leaf wrap) in Taiwan.²⁸ In other words, the seeds of the betel palm (a betel nut) and a specific betel quid both are named *chhi-a* in Holo. In this study, I use “*chhi-a*” specifically to mean one type of betel quid, instead of the “nut.”

Chhi-a is a young betel nut smeared with a layer of “red lime” spice and a piece of betel pepper flower²⁹ sandwiched inside. Other than Taiwan, only people in Papua New Guinea add betel pepper flower although the lime they add is not red lime (Yang 2001:17). *Pau-hiu-a* is made by using a betel leaf smeared with a layer of white lime to wrap a betel nut. Betel leaf is the leaf from the betel pepper (*Piper betle* L.).³⁰ The betel leaf is mainly grown in eastern Taiwan (Wang 1999:69). In many betel nut chewing areas, the basic recipe for betel quid are betel nut, (white) lime and betel leaf (Mack 2001:1638). In fact, betel leaf is “the most common accompaniment globally” for betel quid (Gupta and Warnakulasuriya 2002:78) and this recipe can “produce a pharmacologically addicting stimulant” (Mack 2001:1638).

²⁷ In Taiwan, people used to boil betel nut and then dry it as one way of chewing in the past, yet this way was only supplementary. After the production of betel nut was able to meet consumption needs year round, this type of betel nut almost disappeared.

²⁸ The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) defines betel nut without tobacco as “areca quid,” tobacco without betel nut as “tobacco quid,” and betel nut with tobacco as “tobacco and areca-nut quid.” Yet, this categorization does not fit in Taiwan’s case. By IARC definition, *chhi-a* is a kind of areca quid (Yang 2001:20).

²⁹ In the past, more people used the stem of betel pepper (*Piper betle* Linn.) instead of the flower (inflorescence). At present, it is quite hard to find the former one. Only some aboriginal tribes have kept this way of chewing. The stem of betel pepper and the flower of betel pepper are from different plants that both belong to the Pepper family.

³⁰ Please notice that betel leaf is not botanically related to the betel palm. The betel palm is *Areca catechu* but the betel leaf comes from *Piper betle*.

In the beginning of the betel nut revival, *chhi-a* was popular all over the island, except among Aborigines and people in the Hengchun peninsula.³¹ Most betel nut users in southern Taiwan, however, all of sudden gave up *chhi-a* and turned to *pau-hiu-a* around 1995 (Wang 1995). Today, 90 percent of betel nut users in southern Taiwan chew *pau-hiu-a* and about 50 percent of betel nut users in middle and northern Taiwan chew *pau-hiu-a* (Li 2003:83). I will analyze this transformation and its relationship with the biomedical discourse in more detail in Chapter 5.

The betel nut, also named areca nut, is the seed of the betel palm.³² The scientific name for it is *Areca catechu* L. and it belongs to the *Palmae* family (the palm family, also known as *Arecaceae*). People add lime (calcium hydroxide) into betel nut to give it its intoxicating qualities. The major chemical element of betel nut is *arecoline*, which is “the major alkaloid of the areca nut” (Nai-shin Chu 2002: 111).³³ The alkaline of the lime neutralizes the acid of the betel nut.³⁴ Lime also helps to extract the alkaloids from the betel nut to produce a narcotic kind of stimulant effect.

According to Nai-shin Chu (2002), the claimed effects of betel nut chewing are euphoria, a sense of well being, palpitation, salivation, diaphoresis, heightened alertness, a warming sensation of the body, suppression of hunger, and increased stamina. In general, betel nut is also associated with oral cancer. Nai-shin Chu (2002:113) further shows that some of the claimed effects such as palpitation,

³¹ This is the southernmost region in Taiwan. Many native residents are descendents of the plains aborigines.

³² The betel palm is “a slender, single-stemmed palm tree, up to 30m high. It has a crown of 8-12 leaves at the top” (*Plant Culture*). There are four parts of a betel palm: the stem, leaves, flowers, and fruits. One fruit contains one seed. Each betel nut palm has 2-4 bunches and each bunch contains 400-500 seeds. This amount applies only to Taiwan because there are different betel palms around the world varying based on weather, geography, and agricultural techniques. For example, in India, each bunch contains only 50-400 seeds.

³³ In addition to *arecoline*, *arecaidine*, *arecolidine*, *guvacine*, *guvacoline*, *choline* and red *tannin* are other elements in betel nut (Jiang 1995: 729; Chen 1995:731).

³⁴ When people combine betel nut with lime, it converts *arecoline* to *arecaidine* (*Plant Cultures*).

sweating, a warm sensation of the body or face, and heightened alertness, “have been confirmed by objective psychophysiological or neurophysiological experiments.”

What will happen for those who are regular betel nut users? The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) had identified the areca nut as a possible carcinogen in 2003. Evidence showing a link between betel chewing and oral cancer has been recognized by IARC, yet this was generally believed to be because of tobacco added into betel quid or because betel nut chewers were also likely to smoke tobacco. According to Diana Parsell (2005) however, the IARC was convinced by a group of scientists that “recent epidemiological and animal studies have shown that areca nuts are themselves carcinogenic. Some of the evidence came from studies in Taiwan, where people do not add tobacco to betel quid.”

According to *General Health Statistics* (2003), published by the Department of Health in Taiwan, the rate of death from oral cancer was 2.91 for every 100,000 Taiwanese men in 1984 but it had increased to 15.94 in 2003. Oral cancer has been the No. 4 cause of death from cancer among Taiwanese men since 1995. *General Health Statistics* (2002) shows that while there were 830 people who died from oral cancer in 1995, there were 1502 people who died from it in 2002. Han Liangjun points out that “nearly 90% of Taiwanese with mouth cancer have chewed betel nuts and also smoked” (*Wall Street Journal* 2000). Han first started teaching “Betel Nut Study” in dentist graduate school at National Taiwan University in 1995 to teach how betel nut chewing can damage the human body to future doctors as well as being one way to arouse public attention to the correlation between oral cancer and betel nut chewing. Han said to a journalist that “he has made it his life mission to get Taiwanese [to] stop chewing betel nuts” (*Wall Street Journal* 2000). Chen Guocheng (1995:727) estimates that each oral cancer patient costs at least NT 200,000 dollars

for treatment each year. Meanwhile, he projects estimate that 20 years from now there will be 2,000 new oral cancer patients each year. Chen intends to show how much in social costs that betel nut chewers will “contribute” to Taiwan.

In this biomedical discourse, one of the most important aspects is to first frame betel nut consumption as an “illness,” both of individual human bodies and of Taiwan as a whole. Han urges us to “think of Taiwan as being an organism [where] the betel nut trees are the cancer cells” (*ibid.*). Cancer is a very common metaphor running through this bio-medical discourse. When betel nut consumption is described as cancer, it makes betel nut chewing into a social illness. This analogy of social illness is also common among lay-people. Wang Yongqing, a very rich (the richest) and influential Taiwanese, openly blames betel nut as one of the worst backward customs, as bad as opium smoking in the past. He said,

Betel nut, completely lacking any positive meanings, dares to become so popular today. It has become a dead cultural corner of a civilized society. ...Betel nut culture reveals that our society does not have self-reflexive, self-improving, and self-resisting functions. It is as though the immune system in our body has become abnormal and therefore cannot resist any virus that comes into our body (quoted in Chen 1995:722).

Wang clearly describes how the existence of betel nut chewing is the result of an abnormal body. A health body is supposed to automatically resist viruses. When the body fails to resist a virus, then the body becomes sick. When betel nut chewing is framed as a social illness, the discourse then contains the implied intention to control it. People want to control disease through science. The control of illness is then also based on results from scientific considerations. This makes the biomedical discourse appealing giving it a scientific face, which allows it to present itself as having nothing to do with moral, subjective, and judgmental anti-betel nut views. It makes the motivation for being anti-betel nut based on scientific considerations which implies

that it is objective, neutral, and truthful. Through this same metaphorical process, it is believed that potential users can be threatened away from becoming regular consumers as long as they know enough about the “dangers.” In fact, the government now requires betel nut sellers to add a warning sentence about betel nut causing oral cancer on each betel nut bag, just as tobacco companies must add warning sentences on each cigarette package.

Furthermore, illness is also something unwelcome to the human body. No individual wants to have cancer cells in her/his own body. Cancer cells are something completely bad for the human body. As a matter of fact, cancer cells are not just bad; they are dangerous and deadly. The way to cure the body is then to make sure all cancer cells are killed. The solution to Taiwan’s cancer is thus also found by fixing each individual cell; fixing each individual betel nut users.

In this sense, the biomedical discourse approaches betel nut consumption purely on an individual level. It believes that through revealing its dangers it can threaten individual betel nut users who then might quit. As long as individual bodies can be treated, the cancer cells will disappear from the society. Therefore, the solution to betel nut consumption is metaphorically similar to killing cancer cells in individual bodies. Such individually based considerations however, ignore the social context. There is no way to insert social and cultural aspects into the biomedical discourse on betel nut consumption. Like cancer cells, betel nut “illness” happens to individual bodies due to her/his carelessness (not taking care of their body) or just to fate (no reasons at all, it simply exists). In this discourse, all betel nut consumers are both potentially in danger and potential dangers: they are an illness in Taiwanese society that will increase the public’s social costs for treating them.

Going through a biomedical discourse to arouse public attention to gain support for prohibition is nothing new. This was the major method of building anti-tobacco discourse in many places worldwide such as Taiwan and the United States. If the United States government's target is "Big Tobacco," then the Taiwan government's target is "Big Betel Nut." However, while several big tobacco companies control the tobacco industry, there is no big betel nut company controlling betel nut in Taiwan. Most betel nut shops are individual retail businesses and the distribution people are also small family businesses located in different regions of Taiwan. Although there are some chain stores selling betel nut, none of them is significant enough to control betel nut consumption.

The biomedical discourse is one of the most important parts of contemporary anti-betel nut discourse in Taiwan. In fact, it is the most "legitimate" one since what they claimed to be concerned about is betel nut consumers' "own" health. In this discourse, scholars play major roles. The discourse itself has had a big influence since these scholars are seen as more "knowledgeable," "scientific," and "credible." They are "experts." They own the power of knowledge. In contrast, betel nut consumers' behavior is framed as resulting from a lack of knowledge. That is also why many biomedical researchers often conclude with emphasizing a need for more cancer education for betel nut users.

In this discourse, betel nut consumers are isolated individual persons without any reference to social context. One typical type of study in the biomedical discourse is to research prevalence rates in Taiwan in different populations. In this type of study, betel nut consumers are "blue-collar workers," "male," "concentrated between 20-40 years old," with "middle to high income," and "Aborigines and native Taiwanese" (see Yang *et al.* 2002; Ko *et al.* 1992; Chen and Shaw 1996). Why, however, do

Taiwanese men but not Taiwanese women chew it? Why is their age concentrated between 20-40 years? Why are there more Aborigines and native Taiwanese users than mainlanders? These crucial questions tend to be glossed over in the bio-medical discourse. Furthermore, all betel nut consumers are presented as potential “patients” in this discourse. They need to be treated, either now or later. The goal of these experts is to teach betel nut consumers “the danger” of consuming betel nut. If betel nut consumers quit, it means Taiwan’s cancer cells are killed. If they do not stop, then it means the societal illness still exists and one day the doctors will need to treat these consumers’ oral cancer—the “real” one, not the metaphoric one.

“Cultural Survival” Discourse

To contemporary anthropologists, culture changes through time. Culture is not something static and does not have a fixed boundary. Furthermore, the transformation of culture does not imply a simple idea of evolutionary “progress.” However, to most ordinary Taiwanese, this does not fit with their conception of development. Their idea of cultural change is important for understanding Taiwanese perceptions of betel nut consumption as well as the nation state’s ideology. Taiwan is a rapidly developing country; fast change is a part of its history, or more precisely, a part of its modernization. The popular and mainstream way to think about modernization is to see it as process of unilineal progress. Modernization, from this mainstream perspective, is a process of leaving tradition behind and moving toward “modernity.” That is to say, people expect cultural change to move toward a more modern and progressive state, instead of going backward to a more “primitive” one. Furthermore, this “modernity” in Taiwan particularly indicates an American style, industrial,

capitalist, and democratic³⁵ society today. Many Taiwanese believe that being modern is being more “Western.”

This kind imagination of modernization constitutes a powerful ideological foundation for an “anti-betel nut consumption discourse. I titled this section “cultural survival” because people see betel nut chewing as one of the “imperfect” leftovers from this evolutionary (modernization) process. It is thus very similar to Edward Tylor’s idea of “survivals”—something unchanged in the evolutionary process (Moore 1997:23). Many Taiwanese think of betel nut chewing as a “backward” cultural remainder in the modern era. In this sense, people should give it up just as people should give up many other “backward” customs during the modernization process. In order to modernize Taiwan and make it more “evolved,” many people believe the government should ban betel nut consumption outright.

Yi-yi Tai, the head of a cultural foundation to eliminate betel nut chewing, said, “How can we walk onto the international stage and get respect when Taiwanese are chewing betel nut? My strategy is to show up betel-nut chewers as backward, lousy people” (quoted from Chang 1997). Tai’s words emphasize how betel nut consumers are seen as backward people in Taiwanese society and how they are blamed for slowing down Taiwan’s modernization.

From moral values to progress, betel nut consumption is a sin in the religion of modernity. As Leslie Chang (1997) reports, the “multibillion-dollar betel-nut industry [...] is causing deep embarrassment to a country with a sophisticated economy and vibrant tech sector.” This “cultural survival” discourse is very powerful in anti-betel nut consumption because it links a behavior with the idea of progress. At the same time, being more modern and more advanced is a commonly accepted goal in

³⁵ From my fieldwork, I find even at a local level, people connect modernity with democracy. It is partly because of their common occurrence. Also, see pp. 42 and 43.

Taiwanese society. This therefore makes a majority of Taiwanese agree with being anti-betel nut. Working against betel nut is one way for people to help to modernize Taiwan in the global village.

The Taiwanese government has called several meetings since 1995 on solving the betel nut problem in Taiwan. The Administrative Yuan called a cross-departmental meeting named “the prevention and control of the betel nut problem.”³⁶ In 1997, the Administrative Yuan also set December 3 as “preventing and controlling betel nut day”³⁷ and proposed related betel nut regulations. In 1998, Academia Sinica called a conference to seek solutions for the “betel nut problem” from various academic disciplines. The Department of Health of Taipei City government proposed a draft act to the Taipei City government in 1999 which moved regulating betel nut consumption to the legislative stage. In 2002, the Administrative Yuan made betel nut consumption for teenagers (under 18) as illegal. Taoyuan County government also implemented a policy to regulate betel nut beauties’ clothing in 2002.³⁸

Various policies related to anti-betel nut consumption were thus passed both at local and national levels which covered a wide range of territory, from betel nut production to consumption. These policies also involved many sectors of the government including the financial, agricultural, education, military defense, health, interior affairs, and environmental bureaus. However, despite the government’s effort to control it, betel nut consumption is still a significant part of the landscape in Taiwan. There is no evidence to show a significant decrease so far.³⁹ Why is this? To

³⁶ “*Binlang wenti fangzhi huibao*” (檳榔問題防治會報).

³⁷ “*Binlang fangzhi ri*” (檳榔防治日).

³⁸ Taoyuan County Government comes up with a new “Three No Policy”—no breasts, no buttocks and no belly buttons to regulate betel nut beauties’ dressing style.

³⁹ Yang’s (2002) research on betel nut chewing prevalence rates showed 8.5%, compared with Li Lan *et al.*’s (1996) 10.9% therefore Yang concluded that betel nut consumption had decreased. However, since there is no theoretical standard to measure how much betel nut consumption defines a betel nut consumer, previous research about this prevalence rate already varied between 6.0% to 15.5%

answer this, it is important to see something *beyond* this cultural survival based anti-betel nut discourse.

In Taiwan, most people believe that betel nut chewing is a “traditional” habit. Being a local tradition makes betel nut a “native” symbol. This perception is crucial to understanding how social identity is revealed in betel nut consumption. I will discuss this in more detail in Chapter 5. For now just bear in mind that people have a perception that betel nut is a symbol of native and grassroots Taiwan.

This perception leads to several contesting and contradictory consequences. As mentioned, the dominant perception in relation to betel nut consumption is to see betel nut consumption and consumers as not modern, unhygienic, and dirty. There would not exist a contradiction if people simply embraced completely this “religion of modernity.” However, there is also a simultaneous tendency to emphasize and preserve tradition, especially local traditions, as well as anything “native” in contemporary Taiwan. This is related to the construction of Taiwanese nationalism (in opposition to a Chinese nationalism) today. In this sense, the contradiction arises as Taiwanese also see betel nut chewing as “traditional” and “native” and those characteristics help to justify and legitimate betel nut consumption to a degree.

In other words, two different versions of cultural discourses co-exist. One is to see betel nut chewing as a cultural survival. It then “causes deep embarrassment” therefore should be prohibited. On the other hand, betel nut chewing is seen as a part of native Taiwan and an emphasis on native and grassroots Taiwan is a core value of Taiwanese nationalism. These two discourses work at different levels of a single national ideology. One is to situate Taiwan in a cosmopolitan and modern world. In this sense, Taiwan wants to be part of the modern and Euro-American world. The

(Zhenxun Huang 2003:11). In this sense, I think it is problematic to claim a decrease in betel nut consumption.

other is to situate Taiwan in her nationalist ideology and the construction of Taiwanese cultural identity. This contradiction is crucial to truly answering the “Taiwan betel nut puzzle” and I will return to it in Chapters 5 and 6.

Environmental Discourse

The environmentalist discourse also plays an important role in anti-betel nut discourse. I separate this discourse into two categories. One concerns maintaining a “proper looking” living environment and especially refers to public spaces like streets. The other is in relation to the protection of the natural environment including water conservation and soil preservation. The latter one is a “traditional” environmental concern. The former one, although it also relates to public health issues (meaning a clean living space reduces the spread of disease), focuses less on public health and more on a desire for a clean, sophisticated look for Taiwan.

Concern with the cleanliness of public areas is a quite significant factor in contemporary Taiwanese life. People expect to have clean public space; they do not only concern themselves with their own private space. There is a consensus on desiring a clean public space and one that maintains it is everyone’s personal responsibility to keep it clean. More importantly, clean streets, to many Taiwanese, represent a “modern look.” Once again, this is not just about looking clean, but also about establishing and presenting a modern image and this is why many people argue against betel nut consumption.

In fact, this discourse has been quite powerful in changing people’s behavior. We need only look at how many betel nut consumers spit on the street nowadays in Taiwan: far fewer than before, especially in urban areas. According to my observation, it is actually quite rare to see people walking on the street chewing betel nut in Taipei

today. All betel nut shops now provide cups for their customers and when a betel nut user drives, he now spits betel juice and fibers into one of these.

This has not, however, made Taiwanese more willing to “tolerate” betel nut consumption. The presence of betel nut is not only a sign of a “dirty living space.” It is also a symbol that reminds Taiwanese that some of them are not modern enough and therefore Taiwan itself looks “backward” and dirty. If the focus in this discourse was on purely wanting to have a proper looking living place, there need be no actual ban on betel nut consumption as long as users also keep the living space clean. However, the symbolic meaning of the existing of betel nut consumption, this stain on Taiwan, does not disappear by putting its leftovers into a trashcan. Whether people see betel nut in trashcans or on the streets, both make Taiwan “dirty.” The demand for “clean and non-betel stained streets” is then just the surface of this discourse.

Taiwan’s government now regulates betel nut chewing under hygiene regulations for public space. No betel nut chewing is allowed in public transportation, museums, movie theaters, department stores, and so on. Although technically speaking betel nut chewing, but not spitting, is allowed on the streets, it is prohibited in all “indoor” types of public space. The policy focus thus shows that making the stain stay in a trashcan is just not enough.

The second environmentalist discourse is concerned with threats to the natural environment in Taiwan. Interestingly, this environmentalism discourse uses the metaphor of illness as well. Chen Xinxiong (1994), a scholar from a forestry background, calls betel nut “the cancer of Taiwan’s environmental protection.” The cancer metaphor used here pulls off of the biomedical discourse of “illness” and “treatment.” Furthermore, both the environmental and biomedical discourses appear

in the form of science. They thus both imply that the motivation for being anti-betel nut is neutral, objective, and scientific.

As, I mentioned earlier, the production cycle of betel palms starts in May in Pingdong while other places are finishing the previous cycle. In order to increase betel nut value for places other than Pingdong, the solution has been tried to make their production cycle start later and thus also to finish later. As long as betel palms can continue to be harvested in May and June, farmers of those palms make a lot more money out of it. One way farmers delay the production cycle has been to grow betel palms at higher altitudes in mountainous areas. However, according to Lin Zhuangpei (1995), the roots of betel palms cannot hold the mud as well as other plants and therefore, when the storms come, they cause mudslides. Chen (1995) points to several long term natural disasters such as frequent floods, exhausted underground water supplies, and collapsing mountainous areas all of which he seen as related to planting betel nut on mountainous areas. This collapsing discourse has gained an even bigger following since the 921 Earthquake,⁴⁰ because mudslides in mountainous areas have become much more frequent.

The direct target of the environmentalist discourse is betel nut planting. This focus then downplays the interdependent relationship between production and consumption. It is not only the producers' responsibility. This discourse has gained much support from intellectuals and the middle class since in general they are more into environmental protection issues in Taiwanese society. Therefore, the tension is placed between the middle class and the farmers in this discourse. From a farmer's perspective, as I said earlier, there are few good choices at present. It is then worth pointing out the class distinction of the two sides in this anti-betel nut discourse. This

⁴⁰This is also known as the Ji-Ji Earthquake in Taiwan. On September 21, 1999, an earthquake measuring 7.6 on the Richter Scale struck Taiwan centered in Nantou County. There were 2,415 people who died or still remain missing.

class distinction is hidden under the objective science of the environmentalist discourse. The political and economic inequality between betel nut consumers, farmers, and anti-betel nut people largely goes missing in the framework.

Substance Abuse Discourse

Some people also fight against betel nut usage because they see betel nut chewing as one of many abused substances. As I mentioned earlier, betel nut is a stimulant substance and, as such, it can change the physical condition of the human body in a short time. In addition to medical professionals, many social worker organizations, especially those related to children and teenagers, play a key role in opposing betel nut usage. In this fourth anti-betel nut discourse, betel nut usage is categorized as a substance abuse and therefore it should be prohibited. Betel nut chewing and tobacco smoking are often seen as the first step toward other substance abuse behavior in this discourse. That is to say, once a person starts chewing betel nut or smoking, he/she might later become a drug user.

In this discourse, betel nut is placed in the same category as nicotine, alcohol, and drugs (such as speed or cocaine). Adherents' intention to oppose it is the same as their intention to fight against other kinds of substance abuse in general. Fighting against betel nut is thus an important first step to prevent people from becoming addicted to other drugs. This discourse also has been quite successful in mainstream society. The government has already passed laws to regulate betel nut usage in terms of age, just like the regulations toward tobacco and alcohol.

Under this discourse, however, all betel nut consumers are treated as potential illegal drug users. Furthermore, since illegal drugs relate to crime, it further makes betel nut consumers into potential "criminals" even though in reality most betel nut

users just consume betel nut, a legal substance. This is one reason why there are constantly rumors about betel nut shops also being places for selling drugs in Taiwan. This discourse constructs betel nut consumers as somehow “dangerous” people in society. It also echoes the popular metaphor of cancer—betel nut consumers are a danger to society just as cancer cells are a danger to the human body. Now they only consume betel nut, but soon they may pick up more destructive drug habit, and draw younger users in thereby spreading the disease. Seeing betel nut usage as the first step toward “drug” abuse makes betel nut consumption morally controversial and ambiguous. It expresses a strong moral argument against it. The intention to regulate betel nut consumption under this discourse therefore is an intention to control danger. Through controlling individual bodies, it seeks to eliminate the potential of danger for the larger collective society.

Discourses and Contestation

I want to highlight some points here to show how these mainstream discourses are essential for understanding the betel nut puzzle in Taiwan. Firstly, betel nut consumption is seen as a social illness in these anti-betel nut discourses. When it is framed as illness, this implies a necessity to control it. Supporting these discourses which aim to control betel nut consumption are elites, intellectuals, the middle class, as well as the government. They are people who have power, whether it is the power of knowledge or the power of practicing social control. The objects of this social control are betel nut consumers. Many of them are less educated manual laborers and people of a lower social status in Taiwanese society. It is therefore important to point out the clear class distinction between the controllers and the controlled objects in the contestation of betel nut consumption.

Whether people want to control the illness from a bio-medical or environmentalist perspective, both discourses make use of scientific considerations. Thus, the second point I will emphasize here is the power relations in terms of knowledge as well as belief in science between the middle class and betel nut consumers. Through the power of knowledge, the elite, middle class, and the government are able to discipline betel nut consumers' body to fit in their imagination of modern bodies. Furthermore, when an anti-betel nut discourse is framed as a consequence of science, it then obscures the importance of subjective ideas of the modern as well as its moral judgment of betel nut consumers. A belief in science is a key element of the "religion of modernization" in Taiwan since Taiwanese believe being more scientific is being more modern.

Moreover, betel nut consumption itself is a contested realm. From these discourses, we see how betel nut consumers are both seen as individuals and, meanwhile seen as a lower class group. While anti-betel nut discourses are phrased as the result of objective considerations, people also fight against it because, where moving toward modernity has a positive moral valence, they subjectively see betel nut consumers' "backward" behavior. At the same time, however, their behavior is seen as a representation of local tradition that is important for the construction of Taiwanese cultural identity. Betel nut consumption is thus in the center of multiple discourses within which users and non-users contest and negotiate its meaning.

It is important to see how mainstream discourse represents betel nut consumers because it allows us to understand how and why betel nut consumers create their own discourses to rebel against the mainstream. Furthermore, by examining mainstream discourses, it allows us to see what they are missing and why they are missing these things. From Chapters 3 to 5, I will investigate betel nut

consumers' own discourses as well as what these mainstream discourses are
"missing."

Chapter 3: Gender and Betel Nut

Gendered Consumption

If you are a man in Taiwan, it is very likely that as soon as you walk into a group, people will give you a betel nut and expect you to chew it with them. In fact, you might personally think you should chew it with them since you are a man. This is especially true in southern Taiwan and in the countryside. On the contrary, if you were a woman, as long as you are not an aborigine, then you would not expect to receive any betel nut when you walk into a group. In Taiwan, aboriginal women chew betel nut, but Han Taiwanese women do not. In fact, there is a perception that Han Taiwanese women should not chew it and doing so is almost taboo. At present, betel nut chewing is almost exclusively for men. It is a highly gendered form of consumption in contemporary Taiwan. Men can chew it while they are working, talking, walking, sitting, or driving. Some heavy users even chew it while sleeping.⁴¹

S.S. Strickland indicates for most member countries of the World Health Organization (WHO) that “women are from two to six times more likely to chew the areca [betel] nut than are men” (2002:87). However, in Taiwan,⁴² betel nut chewing is overwhelmingly a male habit. According to various biomedical studies, women are anywhere from 17 to 21 times *less* likely to chew betel nut in Taiwan than men (see Chen and Shaw 1996; Qiu *et al.* 1997; Yang *et al.* 2002). In addition, Wang *et al.*’s

⁴¹ Two informants told me that they put a betel nut into their mouths and chewed it a little bit before they went to sleep. Then, if they wake up at night, they can chew betel nut without actually having to be fully awake. Another informant told me to just imagine it as a pacifier for men.

⁴² Taiwan is not a member of the WHO.

(2003) research about adolescent betel nut chewing also reports that significantly more male than female students chew betel nut.⁴³

On the contrary, in other nations, betel nut chewing is either a female habit or at least a non-gendered habit. For example, in Malaysia and Cambodia (see Figure 2) betel nut chewing is predominately a female habit, while “in India and Thailand the sexes have been more equally disposed to this practice” (Strickland 2002:87). In other words, except for Taiwan, betel nut chewing in most places in the world is not primarily for men.

Country	Men %	Women %	Total %	Ratio of Male to Female %
Kaohsiung, Taiwan	28.3	1.4	13.3	20.2
Indonesia	31.0	9.0	51.0	3.44
Sri Lanka	54.0	42.0	45.2	1.29
Xiangtang, China	39.3	30.5	35.3	1.29
India	12.0	11.0	12.0	1.09
Thailand	16.0	19.0	17.0	0.842
Malaysia	25.0	61.0	46.0	0.410
Cambodia	7.0	41.0	31.0	0.171

Source: Combined from Strickland (2002), and Gupta and Warnakulasuriya (2002)
Figure 2: The Prevalence Rate of Betel Nut Chewing and Gender Rates in the World

Even in Taiwan, in the past betel nut chewing was not exclusively for men. Betel nut chewing was a habit that included both sexes up until only about 100 years ago. It has not “always” been a male habit. Whether aboriginals or Han Taiwanese, whether women or men, betel nut chewing was quite commonly practiced on this island. James Davidson (1901) describes,

⁴³ Differences in the rates of usage in Taiwan are due to inconsistencies from study to study in the criteria that determine who counts as habitual users. According to Huang Zhenxun (2003:11), there is no standard to determine betel nut chewing behavior. Some research defines betel nut chewing behavior by whether someone currently chews betel nut or not (see Ko *et al.* 1992). Some research uses different chewing frequencies (see Chen *et al.* 1996, Chen *et al.* 1999, Ge *et al.* 1999). Other research uses the quantity of betel nut consumed per day, week, or month to decide chewing behavior (see Qiu *et al.* 1997). Therefore, different research has had quite different betel nut chewing prevalence rates as a result. This is also why the sexual ratio varies depending on different research. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, the prevalence rate is between 6% to 15.5% of the total population in Taiwan (Huang 2003).

While the natives of neither sex were specially talkative, their mouths were always active, the chewing of the betel-nut furnishing occupation. "Their cheeks were distended, to an extent which the most inordinate chewer of tobacco could not rival, by masses of red pulp, from which streams of stained saliva overflowed the gums, discolored the whole interior of the mouth with an unwholesome pinkish hue. The nuts were sometimes so large as to protrude between the teeth, producing an effect half ghastly, half grotesque, and shedding ruddy rivulets upon the cheeks and chin" (1901:128).

Davidson's writing clearly points out that both sexes in Taiwan chewed betel nut, at least before and around the beginning of the 20th century. Furthermore, several of my informants also indicated that women chewed betel nut in the past. Chejie, a 50 something year old woman, even thought that there were more women than men who used to chew betel nut. She said,

My grandma chewed betel nut and smoked tobacco. My grandpa smoked but did not chew betel nut. I feel like there were more women than men who chewed betel nut at that time. I don't know why. Maybe it is because in the past, women were the ones who actually ran the household. My grandma was the one who did purchasing and oversaw labor work at home.

Another informant who is around 60 years old told me his grandmother chewed betel nut but not his grandfather. He thinks maybe betel nut chewing was a female habit in the past—women chewed betel nut for killing time and fighting boredom. It is worth noting that both of these "two grandmothers" were people who were born before Japanese rule.

The above statements show that betel nut chewing has not always been a male habit. Native Taiwanese of both sexes chewed betel nut in a not-so-long-ago and still historically accessible past. To whatever extent women chewed betel nut and whether or not betel nut chewing was a female habit in the past, one thing is certain: betel nut chewing was at least not an exclusively male habit in Taiwan even if it also was not an especially female habit. However, betel nut chewing is seen as a male habit today. Many people I interviewed either did not believe or refused to believe that

traditionally native Taiwanese women also chewed betel nut. Why is this? What is it about betel nut that makes Taiwanese think it is, and has always been, a male habit?

Stimulant Substances and Gender

A Male or Masculine Habit?

When talking about legal stimulant substances, most Taiwanese immediately think about betel nut, tobacco, and alcohol. Although coffee, tea, and Coca Cola, with their caffeine, are also kinds of stimulant substances, most Taiwanese do not think so. This is quite different from the United States. An American friend told me that in America, the morally ambiguous connotations toward stimulant substance usage also can include caffeine. Most Taiwanese exclude caffeine and may often be unaware of its prevalence especially in teas and Coke. One reason for this is the popularity of tea drinking in Taiwan. Zhu Naixin in his review of Courtwright's book, *Forces of Habits*, says, "I personally think, although there is caffeine in tea, it is improper to see tea drinking as a kind of substance abuse. Drinking coffee will become an addiction, but drinking tea will only become a habit" (2002:3). This is also why it is quite common for Taiwanese children to drink tea while their parents drink it. They do not think of caffeine, especially caffeine in tea, as a kind of stimulant substance although people do know, at an abstract level, that caffeine is a stimulant.

Betel nut, tobacco, and alcohol are all generally linked with men in Taiwan. A-Yu told me once about a junior high school classmate of his. This female classmate had told him that she did not want to have a boyfriend who neither chewed betel nut nor smoked. I asked A-Yu why she had said so. He said, "I don't know, I guess because she felt like a man should act like a man."⁴⁴ Although the girl's words might

⁴⁴ "Nanren yaoyou nanren de yangzi" (男人要有男人的樣子).

be a bit exaggerated, this points out the general perception of the male gender's association with stimulant substances. Thau-ke-niu told me, she thinks betel nut chewing and smoking tobacco are "traditionally" male habits for native Taiwanese. Therefore, "I feel like men can chew betel nut and smoke, but not women," she said, "it has always been like that." She described it as improper for woman to do these same things.

However, even though the three substance usages all are seen as male habits, people have quite different attitudes in relation to women trying to adopt them. To most of my informants, both women and men, it is more acceptable for women to smoke tobacco or drink alcohol than for them to chew betel nut. I have conducted 22 in-depth interviews and only two of them said it is harder to accept women smoking, one was Chejie (whose grandmother chewed betel nut) and the other was a male informant whose wife had opened a betel nut shop and therefore occasionally chews betel nut to test its quality. A majority of informants thus found it difficult to accept women chewing betel nut. In fact, some informants even refused to believe that women chewed betel nut in the past and insisted that I was wrong about it when I tried to explain the history. Although some informants believed or actually knew native Taiwanese women had chewed betel nut in the past, they thought women should not do it today. Why then do most people have less toleration toward women chewing betel nut?

The first reason for this is the masculinity of betel nut chewing. Although smoking tobacco and drinking alcohol are both seen as male habits, they are not as masculine as betel nut chewing. There is a distinction between a male and a masculine habit in this sense. The distinction between them is a matter of different degrees of masculinity. I do not intend to claim that there is no masculinity in tobacco smoking

and drinking alcohol. Instead, what I mean is that it is possible for smoking and drinking to appear in a feminine way, but it is almost impossible for chewing betel nut to contain femininity for Taiwanese.

A-Wang told me that he has no problem accepting women smoking and no moral objection to it. He said,

It is no problem as long as she is not walking and smoking at the same time. In fact, I think smoking makes a woman more charming... Just imagine a picture in your head: a woman sitting there smoking. For example, sitting in a coffee shop and she smokes a cigarette. Her gesture of smoking will be very different from a man's. Women-smoking looks different. When women smoke, they have a kind of indirect and subtle gesture. That is why people think women smoking looks very pretty.

In Taiwan, eating while walking is considered improper in general for both sexes. Therefore, A-Wang's comment on walking and smoking is an extension of this idea. Provided she does not violate this condition, A-Wang does not argue against women smoking. Instead, he actually thinks it is quite charming for women to do so. A-Wang even used the word "elegant" to describe the gesture made by women when they are smoking. A-Yu also said a similar thing that a woman smoker looks very "feminine," or has *nurenwei* (女人味) in Chinese. This shows the possibility of maintaining (or even increasing) femininity while a woman smokes.

On the contrary, what makes betel nut chewing masculine instead of just a male habit is the possibility of losing femininity. A-Xiu told me,

I definitely do not want to have a girlfriend who chews betel nut. But drinking alcohol and smoking tobacco is fine to me. Drinking and smoking are quite popular (for women) nowadays anyway. Girls who chew betel nut are too much like men. Gradually, she becomes increasingly manlike, such as in her habits and personality. Yet, smoking or drinking does not [lead to this result].

To A-Xiu, the masculinity of betel nut chewing is so strong that once a woman starts to chew it, she will gradually lose her femininity and become manlike. Another

informant said to me, "Women chewing betel nut is too manlike. Does she still want to be a woman?" To him, a woman betel nut chewer, by her action, implies strongly that she does not want to be a woman or at least that she does not care if her behavior is a feminine behavior. By adopting betel nut chewing, they claim that a woman has given up her femininity.

In addition, this loss of femininity is largely said to be due to a woman actively or inactively embracing male influence in her daily life. Shuige, a retired teacher, said,

For a female betel nut user, I think she probably has a strong male influence in her daily life. I mean, if all of her friends were women and she hung out with them all the time, it would be very unlikely that she would pick up a betel nut chewing habit.

Shuige's statement emphasizes the male influence on a woman, seeing this as why she loses her femininity. Whether a woman chooses to accept male influence or she is influenced by her environment, the result of adopting betel nut chewing is a loss of femininity.

The distinction between a masculine and a male habit is important for us to understand why some substances are seen as acceptable for women, but not others. Betel nut chewing to Taiwanese is not only a male habit, but also a masculine one. This is what makes betel nut chewing different from other substance usage. This is despite that most of my informants claiming simply that they could not accept women chewing betel nut because of its low acceptance by the larger society. For example, A-Xiu said, "women smoking is fine to me, but not betel nut chewing because smoking is more popularized." Another informant said, "It is because there are more women smokers than betel nut chewers. I think that means our society accepts women smoking more than betel nut chewing." Still other informants would just say betel nut

chewing is more improper for women. No matter how they answered, the idea behind those statements is the same—betel nut chewing is socially less practiced and therefore it is less acceptable. This statement is, however, not a causal relationship. Instead, it is a circular relationship since low acceptability leads to low practice and low practice leads back to low acceptability again. Adding in an understanding of the masculinity of betel nut then helps us break out of this circle.

Women's Rebellion and Modernity

The second reason for a lower toleration for betel nut chewing for women and a higher acceptance of tobacco smoking for women is the idea of modernity. In Taiwan, the idea of “women breaking social rules,” or as I call it “women’s rebellion” is seen as being modern. Many informants, once they found out that I came from Taipei, often talked about the difference between Taipei women (here meaning more broadly urban women) and southern women (meaning rural women). They often said that Taipei women are more modern and more open while women in southern Taiwan are more traditional and conservative. When my informants said Taipei women are more modern, they particularly indicated that Taipei women are more rebellious, especially against those social rules that regulate proper gender behavior. People have a certain imagination about what “traditional female behaviors” are. To them, a modern woman means she rebels against the image of herself defined by “tradition” much more than a traditional woman would.

One informant, who had worked as a telephone linesman in Taipei before, told me, “In Taipei, most women, especially young women, all smoke tobacco. It is very normal for women to do so in Taipei, but it is abnormal in the south.” His comment is actually not true in reality. Qiu *et al.* (1997) show that the prevalence rate of tobacco

smoking for men and women are 41.13% and 2.25% respectively in Taiwan.

Taiwanese men are 18 times more likely to be smokers than women. To get a handle on this difference, the figure for Italy and Australia shows that men are only 2.14 and 1.18 times more likely than women to smoke (1997:30).⁴⁵ In other words, it is not true that “most” Taipei women are smokers. Nevertheless, this is a valuable statement if we emphasize the cultural perceptions illuminated by it. The underlying meaning of his statement is that there are more modern women smoking—more of them “violating traditional and proper norms of female behavior”—than traditional women. This is why he used the description “normal” and “abnormal” to separate different women’s rebellion. To him, Taipei represents modern and therefore it is normal for Taipei women to be rebellious. On the contrary, southern Taiwan represents “tradition” and therefore it is “abnormal” for women to smoke.

The tendency to connect female smoking and modernity is even more clear if we see how Shuige described women smokers. He said, “the first feeling I have about women smokers is that they are more of a modern type of woman.” He exactly used the word “modern”⁴⁶ to describe women smokers. Here I also want to recall A-Wang’s comment on women smokers from the last section. He describes a woman sitting in a coffee shop smoking. The spatial setting is a coffee shop. A-Wang does not portray it as happening by a street food vendor or even in a restaurant. The specific space—a coffee shop—is seen as modern, urban, and western in rural Taiwan. People in southern Taiwan still drink tea much more than they drink coffee. Although there are many coffee shops in southern Taiwan as well, they are mainly concentrated

⁴⁵ The authors explain this might be because “Taiwan’s national social customs are traditionally more tolerant of men rather than women smoking tobacco, and men have more chances to contact tobacco due to work or occasions to make friends for social and psychological reasons.”

⁴⁶ The Mandarin term for modern, *modeng* (摩登), is directly translated from the English sound.

in urban middle class areas. Coffee shops, from a southern Taiwanese perspective, are still an urban and therefore a more modern space.

In other words, smoking tobacco is seen as modern because of the idea of women rebelling against social rules. Accepting women's rebellion is one of the "costs" of modernity. To my informants, realizing and accepting aloud that there are some things which used to be perceived as exclusive to men, but are now open to women, or to "women's rebellion," is one way to express their modernity. Modernity, in this sense, helps to justify women's adoption of male behavior. This image of modernity is less in relation to the substances themselves in this sense and instead it is related to "women's rebellion" as something seen to be more modern.

However, there is a bottom line in the linkage of modernity and women's rebellion. In today's Taiwan, people often describe modern women as more "open" (or *kaifang* 開放). "Open" here often contains a meaning of being "sexually open." When women's rebellion is about losing control of sexuality, then this modernity becomes morally controversial. For example, Chejie said,

It is harder for me to accept women smokers because they remind me of prostitutes. When we were young, we saw those "tea house girls" smoking cigarettes and calling for 'guests' on the streets. We did not see them chewing betel nut. Therefore, we think women smokers are people who work in erotic places. ... This is the same as for Madams (*mamasan*) too... for the younger generation of women smokers, like girls in my daughter's age [college aged now], I do not think they are prostitutes. They are girls who dislike studying and are more rebellious.

Several informants described women smokers using imagery of prostitution, or at least connotations of "loose women" especially informants who were more than 40 years old. When women's rebellion is seen as something related to being sexually open, it leads modernity into a morally ambiguous area and therefore loses its legitimacy. The key to decide whether a women's rebellion is morally acceptable is

how much it relates to sexual connotations. When it is connected too strongly to being sexually open, it then touches the bottom line and therefore becomes morally unacceptable for women.

To sum up, from an etic perspective, the reasons for different attitudes toward different stimulant substances, despite all being generally male habits, are different degrees of masculinity and association with modernity within the substances. Betel nut chewing is not acceptable for women because it is not only a male habit, but also a masculine one. Meanwhile, people are willing to tolerate women smoking more due to its ability to reveal a more cosmopolitan and western style women's image through the idea of women's rebellions so long as it does not strongly rebel against ideas of controlling sexuality.

Masculinity and Adulthood

Why is it that nowadays the image of betel nut chewers is so closely tied up with masculinity in popular culture, literature, and social reality in Taiwan? From fieldwork, I find the key point to understanding why betel nut chewing is so masculine is to understand how Taiwanese men had their first contact with betel nut chewing. Much research, especially based in biomedical approaches, has tried to understand the motivation for consuming betel nut from an individual basis. This type of research shows how peer pressure and curiosity play important roles to motivate first contact with betel nut chewing. However, this explanation leaves out the larger social and cultural contexts of individual betel nut users. In this section, I will reveal the linkage of masculinity and betel nut chewing in a larger context—the cultural production of masculinity for Taiwanese men in their social life—to explore how masculinity relates to betel nut chewing. I find there are two typical first time stories

in relation to people's first contact with betel nut chewing. One is what I call the "male group *chhit-tho*" and the other is "the taste of adulthood."

Male Group *Chhit-Tho*

Thau-ke told me this of his first contact with betel nut chewing:

I was a junior high school student. After school, we (he and his friends in school) bought one package of betel nut and tried to chew it because we were very curious about how it tasted and what it felt like. You know, we were all quite poor at that time. We did not have any allowance. Therefore, we had to collect all our money together to buy one package. Then we shared it. Each person got one betel nut to try.

A-Yu said,

We were a bunch of friends and classmates. We always played together. We did not have much money that time, so every one contributed some money such as you donated 5 dollars and he donated 3 dollars. We got all the money together to buy betel nut. ... We were together in groups at that time. ... (Where did you chew betel nut?) Our friends went out together to no man's land, the riverside, or some places like that. When we were kids, we just wandered around to catch fish, pick up fruits and so on. Biking and wandering around, stuff like that.

A-Wang said,

My very first time was more than ten years ago, when I graduated from high school. We were still out late at night on a cold day. We were riding our motorbikes from Kending (a national park located in the southern part of Pingdong) to home. It was rainy too. So, we had to buy betel nut to chew [to resist coldness]. ... Some of us had already chewed it but not me. That was my first time.

I have collected many similar stories and they shared several key characteristics. The first characteristic is that it often happened within a group and chewing betel nut is just one of many activities done in these groups. Informants often describe this group of people wandering as *chhit-tho*. *Chhit-tho* is a Holo term and it

can roughly be translated to Mandarin as *you-wan*, meaning wandering around and playing to have fun.

The second characteristic is that this group is a single sex (male) group. This male group is almost exclusive to men. In rural Taiwan, *chhit-tho* is an essential part of Han Taiwanese men's social life. This same group wandering together continues even when they become adults. It is just that the activities they do change during different life stages. For example, when they were children they caught frogs in rivers, picked up fruits, or simply biked around, as A-Yu said. When they were teenagers, they tried smoking, teasing girls, and chewing betel nut together, like A-Wang and Thau-ke said. When they are adults, they go to Karaoke, "flower-wine-drinking" (going to hostess clubs), or even prostitution together (Simon 2003).

This male group *chhit-tho* is a life long social activity to many Taiwanese men. Exploring betel nut is just one of many activities they will do in this male group *chhit-tho* and it often happens when they were teenagers. Xu Daguang (2000) shows that 6.0% of betel nut consumers started betel nut chewing in elementary school, 20.1% in junior high school and 17.4% in senior high school.

While the members of these groups change over time depending on individual social relationships with the people around them, the idea of a group of men playing and having fun together remains. Further, this is an informal group: people do not need to register to be a member and who happens to participate might fluctuate day by day. My informants also emphasized it was a "naturally" formed group, not begun by anyone in particular or serving any kind of purpose.

Different groups of people conducted different activities. As I began my fieldwork, my landlord, who is middle class in terms of income, educational level, and occupation, had just retired. Every day, he either plays golf or goes fishing with a

group of men who live nearby, in addition to discussing stock buying strategies with male friends via mobile phone every morning at home. Some members in my landlord's group are both in the fishing and the golfing groups while others are only in one or the other. My informants in the Garden, however, have quite different kinds of activities as I described in Chapter 2. Several of my key informants came to the Garden almost every night to hang out. In most cases, I was the only woman in their group except when Thau-ke-niu stayed late at the shop doing business. This shows that the male group occupies a significant part of Taiwanese men's daily life no matter if he is a manual worker who repairs cars or a retired middle class worker spending time fishing and golfing. What they do varies depending on their own economic position, but the idea a group of men hanging out remains the same.

I do not intend to claim there are no women's groups in Taiwan. As Thau-ke told me, girls' groups do different things compared with boys. He said girls groups did more "quiet" things with less moving around such as pretend cooking or playing dolls when they were little girls. As teenagers, they might go window-shopping or drinking tea in a pearl milk tea house and chatting. Although girls did play together in groups, they tended not to wander around as boys did. Girls are in groups, but not in groups wandering. The spatial mobility of girls is much more constrained.

The most important feature of this male group for Taiwanese men is to gain and show off masculinity. For Taiwanese men, a real male group *chhit-tho* has to relate to masculine activity. For example, Thau-ke sometimes said that maybe their family would come to Hong Kong to visit me. He always emphasized if they come to Hong Kong, his wife, children, and I can go shopping and do women's things while he and my boyfriend can *chhit-tho* for men's activity, especially visiting such places as Portland Street where there are many prostitutes and hostess bars. In fact, I often

heard conversations about their experiences of going to hostess bars during fieldwork. Jokes, stories, and rumors about it constantly popped up after I hung out with them for a while. In the beginning, I just listened and did not think it had anything to do with my research. Later, I realized that it has a lot to do with my research because it reveals two important elements in producing Taiwanese men's culture. One is this idea of male group activity and the other is the intention of this behavior—producing masculinity through male wandering.

Chhit-Tho Lang

In this male group *chhit-tho*, no matter what the actual activity that men do is, the most important task is to learn to be a “*cha-bo-lang* (查埔人).” *Cha-bo-lang* is a Holo term meaning “man,” but whose connotation is a sense of a “real/masculine man.” The archetype of *cha-bo-lang*, or a real masculine man, is the *chhit-tho lang*. *Lang* means people in Holo. Although *chhit-tho* and *chhit-tho lang* share the same words that refer to wandering around, the meaning shifts slightly in the second term. According to some informal conversations with other Hokkienese speakers, I find that *chhit-tho* is a common term used in other Hokkienese speaking areas, however, *chhit-tho lang* seems to be unique to Taiwan.⁴⁷

The closest Mandarin term for *chhit-tho lang* is *liumang*, meaning rascal, roughneck, or ruffian. The characteristics of *chhit-tho lang* are appreciated, yet also controversial, in Taiwanese culture. *Chhit-tho lang* connotes a set of characteristics that draw on various stories and characters from history, legend, and mass media. For example, the legends about Liao Tianding, who was a thief yet also a hero in Taiwan and the Japanese *yakuza* (gangsters) in the movies all provide vivid sources for *chhit-*

⁴⁷ I am indebted to Tan Chee-Beng for comments on this subject.

tho lang. As for younger generations, Hong Kong gangster movies are also an important source. Some middle age informants complained, however, that the younger generations are not “real” *chhit-tho lang*, they are more like “*guhuozai*” (古惑仔, the Hong Kong word for gangsters). This is because these older informants think of Hong Kong style gangsters as lacking the respect for seniority and ethics⁴⁸ that are emphasized by traditional Taiwanese and Japanese style gangsters—the real *chhit-tho lang*.

Chhit-tho lang is a man, of course, and usually an economically and socially marginal person in society. The most important moral value of *chhit-tho lang* emphasizes “affection and righteousness”⁴⁹ toward his family and his sworn brothers. He is very loyal to them. He is fearless in front of death, power, or authority. “Face,” honor, and righteousness are everything to him. *Chhit-tho lang* is a morally ambiguous role meaning that while he is a local gangster, he is not always considered to be a “bad” person by locals, especially by powerless people. *Chhit-tho lang* often occupies a morally grey area in local society. He is somewhat similar to Robin Hood in English literature—part thief but also part hero. Avron Boretz (2004) describes *chhit-tho lang* as a combination of the “knight-errant swordsman and the gun-toting gangster.”

Taiwanese men have a very ambivalent attitude toward *chhit-tho lang*. One informant told me that as a kid, whenever he saw a *chhit-tho lang* walking on a street and chewing betel nut, he felt very scared but also felt a good deal of respect. He told me, this kind of people are very powerful and they very much emphasize righteousness towards their friends. He said, “They know the proper seniority and ethics even if they are involved in illegal activity.”

⁴⁸ “*Lunli*” (倫理).

⁴⁹ “*Zhongqing zhongyi*” (重情重義).

This ambivalence is made even more obvious from daily life conversation. During my fieldwork, stories that related to *chhit-tho lang* came out automatically very often when Thau-ke, A-Wang, A-Yu, A-Xiu, and I hung out in the betel nut shop drinking beer and chatting. They all enjoyed talking about certain famous Taiwanese gangsters and the “behind the scenes stories” between gangsters, politicians, and celebrity. Thau-ke even told me about local gangster things and his own experience being involved in illegal activities for his sworn brothers.⁵⁰ In fact, their favorite topics about Hong Kong, where I currently live, are gangsters (and prostitutes). They are very familiar with certain place names in Hong Kong, such as Mongkok (although they never been there), because they have watched many Hong Kong gangster movies. They even expressed an unbelievable attitude toward me—how could I not know any gangsters personally after having lived in Hong Kong for three years. They insisted that I did not know any gangsters because I spent too much time studying on campus.

It is worth noting that actually none of them are “real gangsters” in the sense of what they do in daily life or how they make their living, even though some of them might have some past experiences with minor illegal activities. Furthermore, they all know that gangstering is illegal which means they make this connection consciously despite its illegal character. Yet, they still like to claim they have something to do with gangsters or have some knowledge about gangstering even though they also know they are not real gangsters.

In fact, they talk about gangsters with subtle attitude of envy. One important reason for doing so was to show off their masculinity: *chhit-tho lang* are seen as very masculine men in Taiwan and being involved in gang activity is strongly tied with

⁵⁰ In Taiwan, local gangs are often involved in pressing people to pay debts. They may represent underground banks or illegal casinos (there is no legal gambling in Taiwan). They call it “*taozhai*” (討債). The way to press for the payment for debts sometimes is to be very threatening and sometimes can turn violent. Thau-ke told me it was basic preparation to bring a watermelon knife (a long knife) and a gun (which is illegal to own) when they *taozhai*.

masculinity.⁵¹ This reveals the ambivalence of *chhit-tho-lang* in a local context. By talking about gangsters, they showed a strong enthusiasm for talking and thinking about masculinity. Through expressing their understanding and imagination of *chhit-tho lang*, they then are able to produce their gender identity.

When people think about *chhit-tho lang*, one of the first visual images that emerges is betel nut chewing. Chejie said, “I feel only manual labor workers and *chhit-tho lang* chew betel nut.” She later even claimed “it seems most betel nut chewers have tattoos.” In Chapter 2, when I described Thau-ke, I mentioned that he also has several tattoos. From an “outsider” perspective, this is simply a mark of being a gangster. To an insider though, it could be used deliberately as a marker based specifically on how people see certain images and the symbolic connections of tattoos to gangsters. A man might adopt it not because he is really a gangster, but instead because he would like people to have this kind of misconception about him. Therefore, adopting a *chhit-tho-lang* marker, whether it is a tattoo or betel nut chewing, is to adopt masculinity.

Furthermore, women can use this association between *chhit-tho lang* and masculinity as well. For example, one informant told me that he thought some women would chew betel nut because they are female gangsters. He told me, women in gangs think chewing betel nut can make them more like gangsters. In this sense, chewing betel nut is an alternative way for women to gain power, especially power that is built on masculinity.

⁵¹ I noticed the other popular topic, especially between two or more men who meet each other for the first time, are military service stories. This is instead of talking about food, the more typical Chinese ice-breaking topic. In Taiwan, all men have 22 months of compulsory military service. Every time when A-Xiu meets a new friend at a drinking occasion, after the introductions between him and the new friend, he always starts to ask questions about military service. Asking, for example, where his military base was and what branch of the military service he had joined.

However, I do not mean individual betel nut users claim that they want to be *chhit-tho-lang* and therefore chew betel nut. It does not work in this way. What I mean is that betel nut users clearly know the implied linkage between *chhit-tho-lang* and betel nut chewing. This understanding constitutes an important portion of their motivation for betel nut chewing. A-Wang said, “Teenagers chew betel nut because they think it looks cool, like your⁵² *guhwozai*. It is what we call *chhit-tho lang*.” Another informant, who just finished his compulsory military service, chewed betel nut for a while when he served in the military. He then quit. He told me he quit partly due to his mother nagging too much. He said, “my mom said I look too much like a *chhit-tho lang*. You know? *Liumang* (流氓, “gangster” in Mandarin).” This shows that when people consume betel nut, they know the implied image that is accompanies the action.

The image of chewing betel nut is then tied to *chhit-tho lang* and masculinity. These concepts interrelate and reinforce each other. My informants are betel nut chewers and not gangsters, yet by talking about gangsters and chewing betel nut, it makes them feel closer with *chhit-tho lang* and therefore they think they are more masculine. By consuming betel nut, therefore consuming *chhit-tho lang*, they then form their gender identity as men, masculine men.

The Taste of Adulthood

The second type of first time betel nut chewing story occurs in relation to the desire of being an adult. Xu (2000) shows that 43.0% of betel nut users try their first betel nut because of curiosity followed by 36.9% of users trying it because friends gave it to them (see figure 2). Many informants also told me the same reasons for

⁵² “You” means me because I am currently living in Hong Kong.

their first contact with betel nut chewing. They said their very first try had a lot to do with curiosity. Why were they curious about it? I find, in addition to curiosity about what betel nut itself tasted like, when my informants indicated curiosity about betel nut as a primary motivation to try it, it was actually a desire to try to be an adult that mobilized them. In other words, what my informants were curious about is the symbolic meaning of betel nut chewing—what I call “the taste of adulthood.”

Reasons	Rate% ⁵³
Friends gave	36.9
Curiosity	43.0
Work Reason	22.9
People around all chew it	21.0
Others	5.5
Total	129.3

Source: Xu, Daguang 2000

Figure 3: First Time Reasons for Betel Nut Chewing

One male informant described the symbolic meaning of chewing betel nut (and smoking tobacco) in relation to adulthood. He said,

The first message those behaviors [tobacco and betel nut usage] give is, “I am an adult now.” In the past, those were “the rights of adults.” These rights only belonged to senior people. If I do it now, it therefore means “I am an adult also” and I have the ability to become an adult.

His words clearly point out the linkage of adulthood to trying betel nut chewing. Betel nut chewing is seen as an “adult behavior.” I have described how most people had their first contact with betel nut chewing when they were quite young; often when they were teenagers. Being a teenager means leaving childhood and closing in on adulthood. Yet, what adulthood actually is largely remains unknown to teenagers. Therefore, they want to know more about this unknown area and some of them would actually like to try to experience it.

⁵³ This survey allowed multiple selections.

In addition to betel nut chewing, many other things are also defined as adult things such as drinking alcohol and smoking tobacco. One of the reasons for these to be defined as adult things is how the law defines adult behavior. In Taiwan, the legal age for consuming alcohol and tobacco is 18. Meanwhile, this is also the age for having a driver's license, being obligated to do compulsory military service, and taking full legal responsibility for your actions.⁵⁴ To many of my informants, their first betel nut chewing experience is in this context of trying to approach adulthood in advance.

Moreover, the idea of youth rebellion (rebellious against adult rules) also plays an important role in relation to the desire to approach adulthood. A-Xiu said,

That time [first time chewing] was because of curiosity. Chewing betel nut looks cool. That was how I thought that time, the same as did my classmates. We thought, since adults can chew it, we children could chew it too. We just felt curious about it. We wanted to know what they [adult men] felt when they chewed betel nut. Betel nut chewing is an adult thing.

Shuige said, "I think young people chewing betel nut is influenced by youth sub-culture. It is maybe because young people want to copy adult behavior." Chejie also points out the connection between being cool and copying adult behavior. She said, "I think there are more young people chewing betel nut now and it maybe is because they want to be cool. They saw their father and other relatives chewing betel nut." A-Yu also told me that many teenagers think smoking and chewing betel nut makes them look cool because "teenagers nowadays are more rebellious and they follow the rule less." Whether Taiwanese teenagers nowadays actually are more rebellious or not, the important part to them is to experience adulthood by violating adult rules and in this context betel nut chewing is youth rebellion.

⁵⁴ In fact, it is very popular for young people to take the driving test as soon as they are 18 as a legal way to claim adulthood in Taiwan. However, people do not have the right to vote until they are 20.

In general, people tend not to link traditional customs with being cool. People usually assume being traditional means being out-dated and therefore it is quite difficult to be out-dated and cool at the same time. It seems the two contradict each other. However, the idea of breaking the rules is seen as an even stronger source of being cool in youth culture. In this particular sense, the reason young people think it is cool to try betel nut has less to do with the image of a traditional custom, and more to do with legally and socially defined adult male behavior and their intention to rebel against the rules.

Entering Society

The linkage between adulthood and consuming betel nut is more clear when we locate adulthood in larger social-cultural concepts. There are at least two ways to decide adulthood. One is defined by the law and the other is defined by culture. The former is related to when an individual is seen legally as an adult. The second one is in relation to when individual is seen as an adult by a larger society. One way to approach this is to examine when my informants could consume betel nut openly at home.⁵⁵ This is an important question because it is related to how parents perceive their children—when do parents see them as adults.

In Taiwan, the major way to decide when someone reaches the adult stage is whether they have “*chushehui* (出社會),” or “entered society.” Literally, this means going out into society and thus no longer just being at home. This is when people have to go out to deal with the outside world. Yet, the important part of this concept is the ability to make money by oneself and to be able to contribute to the family

⁵⁵ In Taiwan, as is common in Hong Kong, China, Korea, and Japan (among others) sons and unmarried daughters often continue to live with their parents long after they finish school, start working, and even for some after marriage.

economically. This idea of linking adulthood with the ability to make money is very important in Taiwan.

One good example to express the importance of connecting adulthood and the ability of making money for Taiwanese is in the practice of giving red-pockets (*hongbao* 紅包) during the Chinese New Year holiday and other ritual occasions. In Hong Kong, people have to give out red pockets for Chinese New Year as soon as they get married. In Taiwan, however, people give out red-pockets as soon as they have gotten a job and thus have “entered society.”

This shows how these two Chinese societies perceive the adult stage differently. In Hong Kong, an individual is seen as an adult as soon as she/he gets married. In Taiwan, however, the criteria for becoming an adult is whether she/he starts a real job and can therefore contribute to the family economy. As soon as a Taiwanese stops being a student and becomes a worker, then she/he is an adult. Thau-ke told me, as long as you can prove “you have money in your pocket,” then you have entered society. The “money” of course, came from your own work, not your parents.

Entering society is often accompanied by receiving “betel nut permission” (*binglangpai* 檳榔牌), “tobacco permission” (*yanpai* 煙牌), and “liquor permission” (*jiupai* 酒牌) in one’s individual household. These permissions mean “the right to do such things openly at home.” The permissions, in this sense, come from parents and are an often unspoken consensus between parent and child. Asking tobacco permission from parents is known as “*qing yanpai* (請煙牌),” literally meaning “applying for tobacco permission.” Thau-ke said, in general a person can apply for permission after they have entered society. A-Xiu said that when he first started chewing betel nut, he could not chew it at home, let alone chew it in front of his parents. However, after he entered society, he then gained betel nut permission. He

reasoned this was because he used his own money and not his parent's money to buy betel nut, they had no other reason to stop him. A-Yu also told me that, in general, people get permission after they entered society because they are no longer spending their parent's money.

I do not mean to say that children can disobey their parents as soon as they start earning money. Instead, I mean that parents can no longer prohibit them from doing "adult" things as easily. As a result, trying betel nut chewing is a way to experience adulthood. What these teenage "men" are actually curious about is "how it feels like to be an adult." Through experiencing betel nut chewing, they experience adulthood. Yet, this does not mean that they are actually recognized as adults. Parents will not recognize their behavior "officially" until they have entered society. This last boundary then has less to do with legally defined age than it has to do with a social norm—whether an individual has a formal job and therefore can contribute to the family economy. In other words, the cultural concept of adulthood plays an important role in deciding whether someone receives betel nut permission. This cultural idea of permission then also reinforces the linkage between betel nut chewing and adulthood.

Masculinity, Rebellion, and Power

Some anthropologists have noticed the importance of the male group and how it produces masculinity in Taiwanese men's social life. Scott Simon describes Taiwanese men's flower-drinking in his life story of a Taipei women entrepreneur. He says, "flower-drinking is a set of cultural practices in which men in *groups* of two or more visit commercial establishments that offer varieties of erotic entertainment" (Simon 2003:190, my emphasis). Simon thus notes that the nature of flower drinking is based in male groups.

Boretz' (2004) detailed analysis of carousing (especially drinking and singing) and masculinity which aims to understand the cultural production of gender in Taiwan is quite similar to Simon's "flower-drinking." In his analysis of carousing, Boretz describes "seven elements that frame this activity as a particular field of social practice and cultural production (and in rough order of necessity): eating, drinking, sexual play, singing, betel nut chewing, gambling, and smoking" (2004:17). Boretz analyzes how men gain masculinity through their carousing and how important the social practices it contains are for producing gender identity for Taiwanese men. Interestingly, he also notes the role of betel nut chewing as one element in constructing male culture even in urban Taiwan.

When Paul Festa (2004) described the Viagra craze in Taiwan, he said that Viagra is "a means of activating and reproducing *friendships and connections*, the most enduring characteristics of Taiwanese male culture"(Festa 2004:210, my emphasis). Festa thus also notices the most appreciated characteristics of Taiwanese male group *chhit-tho* is the "friendships and connections" between men. The male group and its relationships are a life long thing and it occupies a core part of men's social life. A Taiwanese psychologist, Wang Haowei (1998:107), describes how almost all Taiwanese men have these groups in different life stages and that women are largely excluded from this group.⁵⁶ He specifically points out that this is where Taiwanese men explore and practice their sexuality and their sexual knowledge.

I want to highlight two points here. First, Taiwanese men are socialized into masculinity through various group activities. Second, those group activities, as a result, create solidarity between men. Taiwanese men, in their own groups, bond

⁵⁶ I said women are "largely" excluded because even when women are a part of male group activity, such as the existence of women in hostess bars, does not mean that women are able to joining the male group. Their participation is rather used as a tool, much like betel nut, to emphasize the masculinity of men. The judges of masculinity, even when women are present are still one's fellow men.

together. In fact, the idea of *chhit-tho-lang* also represents a specific idea of male loyalty and male bonds since the most important value for *chhit-tho-lang* is his righteousness to his family and sworn brothers.

To be socialized into masculinity is to become a “real” man. This “real” man is further an imagination of Taiwanese men, not of women. This real man is not only active in male group activities, meaning carousing occasions, but also in his family life. As a result, being a real man in one’s individual household means being the breadwinner at home. As Tiange told me, he knew betel nut chewing is not a good habit, but at least he took family responsibility like a real man (since he claimed that he chewed betel nut for work).

Again, there are two points here. First, in order to be a breadwinner at home, or “take family responsibility like a man,” betel nut users are able to justify their chewing behavior both domestically and socially. Chewing betel nut then is a matter of taking family responsibility, in order to be a real man, in addition to being a way to show one is a real man outside the household.

Second, when betel nut chewing is justified by masculinity, this serves to suspend class distinction in betel nut consumption. That is to say, to betel nut users, betel nut chewing is more about being masculine or not instead of being about doing heavy manual worker or not. Paul Wills (1979) analyzes the relationship between factory workers and masculinity. He shows how factory workers see finishing heavy manual work as the representation of their masculinity. As a result, it makes the focus, which he feels is supposed be on the exploitative relations in the factory, turn into the realm of gender. A worker who is able to finish heavy work shows his masculinity both by conquering the toughness of the work as well as by being a breadwinner at home.

This shows, as Wang (1998:108) points out, how pursuing masculinity is pursuing power in Taiwanese male culture. When they were boys they wandered around to gain power through spatial mobility as contrasts with girls' activities which were more static. When they were teenagers, they experienced smoking and betel nut chewing as experiencing adulthood as a way to gain power over their bodies from their parents' control. Furthermore, this is also a way to break the adult rules since none of them is able to gain "permission" because they have not yet entered society. This makes this youth rebellion a rebellion against seniority as well. On the other hand, women's rebellion, such as through tobacco smoking, is a rebellion against expected gender behaviors in society. Although a woman smoking also contains some degrees of resisting seniority, this is not as prominent as its intention to reject gender expectations and its ties to discourses of modernity.

Moreover, the archetype of masculinity, the *chhit-tho lang*, rebels against official power since a *chhit-tho lang* is seen as someone who is outside official control. In this sense, being (or desiring to be) *chhit-tho lang* is to gain power over state control. Ironically, this does not lead to a revolution or rebellion against the state precisely because it focuses attention on gender and, in doing so, it gives betel nut users a sense of having some power. This is important because part of the reason betel nut users pursue power is because they do not have power in the larger society. They are (relatively) politically and economically marginal people in Taiwanese society. Their lack of political and economic power is appeased through this sense of masculinity which provides some power including that of excluding women and that of talking about have some resisting the official.

Betel nut chewing is then not just a matter of adopting a substance use. It forms an integral part of producing male gender culture in Taiwan. Locating it within

this context, we thus have a deeper understanding of why peer pressure and curiosity—the biomedical discourse’s motivations for betel nut chewing—motivates Taiwanese teenagers to try betel nut chewing. Furthermore, this masculinity brings some degree of “empowerment” to betel nut users which therefore decrease the possibility of a radical rebellion against the state. The class distinctions thus are able to be suspended and from the state’s perspective, it maintains its power over the people who do its manual labor.

Chapter 4: Class and Betel Nut

"No Class Distinction, Just being Siwen or not"

During fieldwork, one thing that bothered me the whole time was the idea of *siwen* (斯文). All my informants, whether they chewed betel nut or not, constantly told me that there was no class distinction between users and non-users and that, instead, it is only that people who do not chew betel nut are more *siwen*. On the contrary, people who do chew it are more *culu* (粗魯).

It is very hard to translate *siwen* into English since *siwen* is a very specific cultural concept. *Siwen* as a term indicates "polite, cultured, refined, elegant, gentle, or civil in manner" (*Chinese-English Dictionary of Modern Usage*). *Si* itself could refer to a cultured or refined person or the educated class. *Wen* as a noun means "literary" or as an adjective "cultural." The opposite term of *siwen* is *culu*, meaning "stupid, vulgar, and coarse" (*ibid.*). However, there are also additional cultural meanings in the idea of *siwen*. In general, when people refer to someone as *siwen*, it implies the Confucian kind of intellectual—the scholar image. *Siwen* people might have good academic performance yet be bad at sports. Moreover, *siwen* people are usually linked with a clean image. It is quite difficult for someone to be *siwen* and also have dirt on their clothes or a disorderly house. Furthermore, *siwen* and *culu* are related to femininity and masculinity. While both terms can be used to describe men and women, an extremely *siwen* man is seen as more feminine in Taiwan.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ It seems the linkage of extreme *siwen* and femininity is not as obvious in other Chinese-speaking society. Tan Chee-Beng (personal communication) did not feel that this implication applies to other Chinese societies.

Thau-ke-niu, although selling betel nut herself, actually does not want her husband to chew it. She said,

I don't want my husband chewing betel nut because people who chew it usually look more *culu*. ...People who chew betel nut are usually those *culu* type people.

Thau-ke-niu would like Thau-ke to be more *siwen*, since now she thinks that he is too *culu* because he chews betel nut quite a lot. She expects her husband to look more like a cultured person.

Thau-ke's older brother's girlfriend, who even fines her boyfriend if she catches him chewing betel nut (the fine is NT 1,000 dollars per nut), told me, "Don't you think betel nut users' red mouth looks very *culu*? An originally *siwen* looking man, as soon as he chews betel nut, ruins his image."

She uses her power within their relationship to force her boyfriend not to chew. In reality though, the boyfriend still chews betel nut. He chewed while she went back to her home in Taizhong (a 3 hour drive from Pingdong). When he chewed it however, he took away the betel leaf that contains the lime to keep from producing red saliva and therefore to keep from leaving any "evidence"

A-Wang said to me, "Compared with the Aborigines, native Taiwanese are more *siwen*. Therefore the chewing rate is lower than for Aborigines." Tiange told me, "Mainlanders are more *siwen* so therefore there are less mainlanders chewing betel nut." They both use the idea of *siwen* to explain why one group has a higher chewing rate than others do. I will explain the connection between ethnic groups and betel nut in detail in the next chapter. A-Yu, telling me that betel nut users are "*cu* style people (*curen* 粗人)," also uses the same way to distinguish users from non-users. My intention here is to show how people use the idea of *siwen* to talk about betel nut users.

Furthermore, to my informants, being *siwen* or not is not only a description for differentiating betel nut users and non-users, but also is a reason for consuming betel nut. That is to say, it is more likely for *culu* people to chew it than for *siwen* people do so, according to my informants. However, this is not purely a one-way cause and effect relationship. The two elements reinforce one another. Betel nut users look *culu* because they chew betel nut and it is more likely for a *culu* person than a *siwen* person to chew it.

In contemporary Taiwan, many people, especially those who do not chew betel nut, have a negative image not only of betel nut chewing behavior but also of the people who chew it. The majority of Taiwanese see betel nut users as “lower” class, or working class. Some assumed characteristics relate to this class of people such as lower educational level, manual labor, and lower social status. In fact, I came across many people who disagreed with, looked down on, or disdained my research simply because of the people I study. An acquaintance of my parents, who is a typical middle class Christian, asked me why I have to research betel nut users. He thought it was too dangerous and improper for people like me (a well educated woman) to research betel nut users.

In the beginning of my fieldwork, my landlady kindly reminded me that I have to be very careful when I hang out with these betel nut chewers. She said, “People who chew betel nut are not really good people.” A misunderstanding between my landlady and I may best portray this distrust toward betel nut users.

On a Saturday night about two weeks after I started my fieldwork, I stayed out quite late hanging out with my informant-friends. My landlady called me around midnight to ask me when I would come home. I told her there was no need for her to wait up for me. Later I got another call around 3 o’clock in the morning to ask me if I

was still “safe.” The next morning, to be polite, I apologized to her for making her wait so late for me. I told her that the next time there was no need for her to do it again. She said:

Those people who chew betel nut are not good people...you are a single, young, and unmarried woman. I worried, well, if they did anything to you...if they were friends of yours *from your college* then I would not worry, but they are people you met *at a betel nut shop* (my emphasis).

To my landlady, and largely to other non-users, betel nut users are dangerous and untrustworthy because of their (working) class association. Therefore, to my landlady, if I went out with people I knew these friends from college (future middle class Taiwanese) then it is unlikely for them to hurt me. On the contrary, since I knew them from the betel nut shop, this then implied they may threaten my safety (both as a person and as a woman since she emphasizes that I am an unmarried woman). In other words, from a non-user’s eye, all betel nut chewers are potential dangers in society.

Yet, it is worth noting that not all betel nut chewers are “working class” and not everyone in the working class chew betel nut. When I refer to “working class betel nut chewers,” I mean manual laborers. They could be drivers (the “stereotype” of betel nut users), car fixers, small shop owners, or salespeople. In Taiwan’s context, petty capitalists are also considered working class people (e.g. Gates 1981). Meanwhile, there are also many manual laborers who do not chew betel nut, or at least do not chew it regularly. In this sense, when I use the term “working class” in this chapter, I only refer to betel nut chewers who belong to the working class.

Nevertheless, while some Taiwanese see betel nut chewing as a symbol of danger, other Taiwanese take advantage of this symbol for their own use. Several occasional betel nut users told me that they chewed it when it was helpful for doing business. One informant, who is the owner of a motorcycle shop, said that if you

chewed it with them, it really made people (betel nut users) feel much closer with you . He chewed it deliberately to play down class in order to acquire business benefits. Betel nut chewing is then both a method to build social relations and to play down class.

Yet at the same time, betel nut consumers tend to avoid class-based ways of differentiating users and non-users. They describe it instead in cultural terms; they are simply more *culu*, not *siwen*. *Culu* or *siwen* makes the difference into one of personality type, similar to being more optimistic or more pessimistic. It thus becomes a personal issue, not a class one.

However, *siwen* is a specific cultural concept that refers to both an individual person and a group of people who are “cultured, educated and refined.” This is not only an individual difference; it refers to class as well. In other words, while users employ this *siwen* discourse to resist class implications, this does not mean there is no class distinction between them and non-users.

In this sense, it is important to ask what then do *siwen* and *culu* actually mean, especially in relation to betel nut consumers? What is the cultural logic behind these two terms? In this chapter, I will unpack this cultural concept through different kinds of discourses that my informants employ for denying the class implications of betel nut. I will show how my informants create their own discourses to rebel against mainstream discourses and meanwhile how class distinction is still articulated from within their own discourse.

Discourses, Resistance, and Modernity

Since Thau-ke is the owner of the betel nut shop, it is understandable that he would not want me to think of betel nut negatively. He sometimes introduced me to

his customers when they came by to buy betel nut. He told them that I was a master's degree student who came here to research on betel nut. The customers often would show a strange face and then say something like, "Are you kidding me?" Thau-ke often told his customers that "there are cultured meanings in betel nut" (*binlang ye shi you wenhua* 檳榔也是有文化), that "betel nut is a kind of culture too" (*binlang yeshi yizhong wenhua* 檳榔也是一種文化), or that "betel nut is a kind of Taiwanese culture" (*binlang yesuanshi women Taiwan wenhua de yizhong* 檳榔也算是我們台灣文化的一種). He usually defended betel nut consumption if his customers remarked that it was something not cultured. It was not until the middle of my fieldwork, when we were familiar enough and, perhaps, once he believed that I did not look down on betel nut chewers that Thau-ke was willing to admit that betel nut chewing is seen as a lower class mark.

One evening when I sat with Thau-ke helping him to do some betel nut cutting work, a customer came by and asked him if I was their new employee. Thau-ke told him that I was a master's degree student researching betel nut here. Not surprisingly, the customer showed a weird expression and left. Then Thau-ke and I had conversation about this.

Thau-ke: See, everyone here is very surprised once they find out you are a master's degree student.

Me: Why? Is it because I don't look like a Master's student?

Thau-ke: No, it's not, it's because you came to research betel nut.

Me: What's wrong with researching betel nut?

Thau-ke: You know, betel nut is something belonging to a lower class (*bijiao diji* 比較低級) and you are a postgraduate student. Why would someone like you want to research betel nut?!

My intention here is to show that, despite betel nut users denying that betel nut chewing is a lower class marker, they are aware of how the mainstream discourse portrays them. To a certain degree, they also accept it as true. Yet, they consciously

create their own counter discourses to rebel against that of the mainstream. Their agency is practiced through their creation of discourses as well as their negotiation within the mainstream. In this section, I will introduce the three counter discourses that they make use of: hygiene, individual choice, and a good work ethic. I will examine how they create these counter discourses and how they appropriate the mainstream discourses. Most important of all, I will show how class is contested in betel nut consumption through various discourses.

Hygiene and Modernity

In Chapter 1, I mentioned how Japanese saw betel nut chewing as unhygienic and how this, in turn, influenced the perceptions of Taiwanese elites and intellectuals about betel nut chewing. It is important also to locate this concept of hygiene in a larger social context. Controlling tropical disease (especially malaria) in order to provide the Japanese ruling class with a healthy living environment was the first thing Japan needed to do as soon as they took over Taiwan. The Japanese philosophy of public health came from Germany. They believed that the government should use its policing power to adjust social customs in order to have better public health and hygiene.

The Japanese emphasized teaching local people about individual and public hygiene (Zhu 2000:322) as a way of building Taiwan into a “modern colony” as well as protecting the health of Japanese residents on Taiwan. Chen Roujin indicates that Taiwanese learned to use a toothbrush and cultivated a daily habit of brushing their teeth while Japan ruled Taiwan (2005:50). Teaching personal hygiene habits was one of the core purposes of elementary school education during that time, as Wu and Winkle say, “primary education emphasized civics, physical education, and

sanitation” (2005:175). Chejie described her mother, who had received Japanese elementary school education, saying that people in her mother’s generation, as long as they received education, did not chew betel nut.

There are two impacts inherited from the Japanese rule in relation to betel nut usage. First, the image of betel nut chewers as aborigines, manual laborers, and people in the countryside gradually formed since then (Zhu 2001). This is because, as mentioned, the hygiene regulations (including the control of betel nut chewing) were stricter in urban areas than in rural areas (including aboriginal communities). This was partly because there was a higher population density in cities and thus contagious diseases spread faster, and partly because more Japanese lived in the cities so, to protect them, hygienic regulations had to be stricter.

Second, the public, especially urban residents and elites, began during this period to see betel nut chewing as unhygienic. In spite of betel nut chewing being revived again after the 1970s, the idea of it as unhygienic has remained. The primary anti-betel nut discourse is built on the idea that it violates modern concepts of hygiene. Much of the middle class in Taiwan describes betel nut chewing as an unhygienic habit which should be prohibited.

People who are not familiar with betel nut chewing may not understand why it is seen as unhygienic. The motion for chewing betel nut is like chewing gum. In fact, betel nut in Taiwan is often called “Taiwanese chewing gum,” or *Taiwan kouxiangtang* (台灣口香糖). Although the movements for chewing gum and chewing betel nut are similar, their effects are still very different. When a person chews chewing gum, she/he only needs to spit out the residue in the end when there is no flavor left. However, when a person chews betel nut, she/he needs to spit out blood-red betel juice (combined with saliva) throughout the process. Since the juice can

stain the chewer's mouth, lips, and teeth red, people in Taiwan often call betel nut users a "Red Lips Tribe," or *hongchunzu* (紅唇族).

Some heavy users swallow all of the betel juice to maximize its stimulant effects but these people are not common. The longer people chew a betel nut, the less juice is left in it. When the nut is dry enough, people then spit the residue out. The fibrous residue is a piece of mashed red fiber similar to the leftovers of chewed sugar cane. In this sense, chewing betel nut may look a bit like someone chewing tobacco except that the spit of tobacco chewers is not bright red in color. The spitting of red saliva and betel fibers as well as the red stains on lips and teeth are crucial elements that make them look "unhygienic." In addition, the stained teeth are often seen as a "primitive" marker in contemporary Taiwan. In addition, chewing it creates more trash and stains for public living areas, especially as some users spit on the streets.

Nevertheless, red stains, spitting, and unhygienic are not necessarily correlated together in any objective sense. The reason they have been categorized as unhygienic is actually related to contemporary standards of "proper appearance." In modern Taiwan, white teeth and "clean" lips (lips without any stains) are considered minimal requirements for proper appearance for both men and women. In order to pursue white teeth, some people increasingly even undergo special surgery to whiten their teeth. Yet, some Aborigine groups in Taiwan used to see black teeth as beautiful in the past; therefore, being pretty was one reason that they wanted to chew betel nut.

In addition, attitudes toward spitting also have changed through time. As few as thirty years ago, it was not uncommon to see people spitting on the street, a sight which is rare today. To most Taiwanese nowadays, only old people would spit on the street. In fact, Taiwanese now often criticize people in mainland China as unhygienic after they travel to the PRC because they often see people spitting in public. After

SARS broke out in 2003, Taiwanese not only saw spitting as unhygienic, but also dangerous—it can spread contagious diseases. This new danger of spitting just reinforced the prevalent attitude of disgust over the practice.⁵⁸

Thus, proper appearance here indicates a clean and hygienic look that is a basic requirement for everyone and many even expect to exceed this. People who do not follow this basic requirement of cleanliness are considered unhygienic. Yet, this basic requirement to define a proper appearance has not always existed. This was born in and changed during the process of modernization.

Although attitudes toward spitting, proper appearance, and hygiene could simply have changed through time in any particular direction, there is a commonly held perception among people in Taiwan that these changes are evolutionary. Therefore, hygiene, in the context of how it was introduced to Taiwan, means modern. This connection between hygiene and modernity was built into the idea of a “modern colony” which the Japanese could better control. Better hygiene means more modern and going against such perceptions is not modern; therefore spitting, red or black teeth, and betel nut chewing are all traditional and even “backward.”

It is important to address this point especially when people claim opposition to betel nut chewing for “hygienic reasons,” since being unhygienic is engrained as the opposite of modern. This actually also implies that they think betel nut chewers are less modern or less “evolved.” The underlying intention for prohibiting betel nut chewing, therefore, is to “modernize” betel nut chewers. The link between hygiene and modernity is more obvious in practice when people talk about the possible future rates for betel nut chewing. Some informants claimed the population of betel nut

⁵⁸ Hong Kong people share a very similar attitude with Taiwanese toward spitting. They also think spitting is dangerous, especially in the post-SARS era, since both Taiwan and Hong Kong were under its threat. Further, such attitudes, as directed towards the Mainland, are also influenced by border creation and maintenance and thus are never simply objective matters of hygiene.

chewers would decrease in the future because, as society “progresses,” people will emphasize hygiene and cleanliness more and will chew it less.

The idea of being cleaner as connected to being more modern is not unique to Taiwan. Georges-Vigarello (1985), through examining bathing habits, describes how French people’s hygienic habits have changed. He said,

Cleanliness here reflects the civilizing process, in its gradual moulding of bodily sensations, its heightening of their refinement, and its release of their subtlety. It is a history of the refining of behavior, and of the growth of private space and self-discipline: the care of oneself for one’s own sake, a labor ever more squeezed between the intimate and the social. On a wider plane, it is the history of the progressive pressure of civilization on the world of direct sensations (1985:2).

Vigarello points out that the changing concepts of cleanliness reflect different degrees of control over the individual body and especially over the bodies of poorer people. Furthermore, he recognizes that the increasing standard of cleanliness is a part of this “civilizing process” through the body. Hygiene here is a product of modernization and this too is particularly true in the Taiwan case. In addition, Vigarello shows how the idea of cleanliness was employed to distinguish people based on class. That is to say, the concept of cleanliness is not an objective description in relation to individual people. Only wealthy households could afford the time away from productive work (or the cost of hiring someone else) that it cost to do laundry on weekly or even daily basis. White sheets showed wealth and the working class was destined to dirtiness by comparison. Hygiene was thus the creation of a new boundary between different classes and a mark for “being a civilized person” as well.

This class implication echoes the local concept of *siwen*. As I have described, there is a linkage between *siwen* and looking clean in Taiwan. When my informants describe *siwen* people as appearing cleaner and being less likely to chew betel nut, it shows also how *siwen* is used to distinguish different classes through the concept of

cleanliness. This is despite of my informants denying that class distinctions existed between them and non-users. As a result, cleanliness is not just about different personal hygienic habits. It is a way to differentiate the working class from the “cultured class” or a way to separate *siwen* people from *culu* people.

Hygiene meanwhile also contains a reputation for being scientific; at least it aims to be presented in this way. For people who are against betel nut chewing, appealing to hygiene then is a scientific way to do so. Science then legitimates the implied moral judgment toward betel nut users. By using the concept of hygiene, which is supposed to be modern, scientific, and objective, the mainstream discourse presents itself as having an objective and unbiased attitude from which to oppose betel nut chewing. It can also be framed as, “for their own good.” In this sense, fighting against betel nut chewing would be seen as the result of scientific considerations and so not having any direct linkage to any kind of discrimination toward the people who chew it. It is a safe way to express opposition to betel nut chewing in a more politically correct manner.

“Only a matter of Hygiene!” As Resistance

Yet, this is not the end of “the story of hygiene.” Betel nut chewers do not just accept the mainstream discourse passively without realizing the implied negative connotation that is projected on them. Instead, betel nut users re-appropriate the modernity/hygiene discourse. They follow this hygiene discourse to justify betel nut chewing as simply a matter of hygiene—no more, no less.

A-Xiu told me,

People who do not chew it, their mouths are cleaner, unlike us having betel nut stains on our teeth. Their hygienic habits should be better, too. For example, when they spit, they probably would spit into trashcans instead of on the road, while we might spit betel nut juice on the road. But I think people who have

higher education, they might still cruise about chewing betel nut. Therefore I do not think education level matters for whether people chew it or not. You know, there are many well-educated people who still smoke when they feel too much pressure in school. Chewing it or not is just a difference in hygienic habits.

A-Wang said,

For example, if your boyfriend loves cleanliness a lot, will he chew betel nut? Probably not, right? If someone is the kind of person who likes to keep every thing clean, he will dislike betel nut chewing.

To A-Xiu and A-Wang, the difference between users and non-users is only a matter of different hygienic habits. It has nothing to do with being modern or “backward.” It is a difference of degree and differs from person by person, not by who chews it and who does not. Some people like to be clean more than others. It has more to do with your individual cleaning habits. Just like there are some people who prefer to mop the floor everyday and others who like to do it once a week, this is only a quite normal difference in degree of cleanliness. Therefore, by the same token, a person could be very dirty and yet not chew betel nut or vice versa. Being only a matter of different *degrees* of cleanliness, it cannot contain the binary opposition of modern and “backward.”

In other words, when betel nut chewers use hygiene, they make it into a scale of degrees of cleanliness. They follow the core concept of mainstream hygiene discourse and then appropriate it so as to reframe it as only relative degrees and therefore as having nothing to do with modernity. To a certain extent, they “simplify” the idea of hygiene by only focusing on its cleanliness. In effect, it forgets the modernity that accompanied hygiene because different degrees of cleanliness can have no such obvious cut-off for being modern or not. Betel nut chewers repackage the discourse of hygiene such that it has no relationship with people’s morality,

progressiveness, or modernity and all that remains is hygienic habits—no more, no less.

Framing Individual Choice

The second counter discourse is to frame betel nut usage as a personal choice rather than a class habit. In fact, this individualistic indication also exists in the “only a matter of hygiene” discourse as well. Here I want to focus on the individualism of betel nut users’ counter discourses. In the field, my user informants constantly told me that betel nut chewing is just a personal habit. For example, Tiange said,

It all depends on *personal interest* and everyone thinks different things are interesting. Some people like to drink, some like to chew betel nut, and some like to go fishing. It is all about individual interest (my emphasis).

A-Wang said,

There is no difference between users and non-users. It is only an *individual habit* because chewing betel nut is just something that has to do with your mouth. You decide whether you chew it nor not. There is nothing good or bad about it (my emphasis).

When framed as a personal habit, it indicates individual choice. That is to say, users choose to do it on an individual basis, not because they belong to a certain class. To them, they just happened to find betel nut interesting, like someone may happen to find antique collecting interesting. It is not a class-based consequence.

Furthermore, by focusing on individual choice, it actually gives them a “modern look.” This is because there is an idea that individualism is something relatively “new” in Taiwanese society. Here they call on the idea of freedom of choice, as compared with the common perception that “traditional” culture emphasized more “collectivism.” People think “individualism” has come from the “West,” and to betel nut users, this is their way to reject the linkage of betel nut chewing and lower social

status. They further appropriate chewing as their own choice. They just happened to choose a lower class habit. It is *not* that they belong to a lower class and therefore they “naturally” adopted it.

Haokan: Physical Beauty and Proper Social Behavior

Within this individual choice framework, one way to explain betel nut chewing behavior is based on how much a man cares about his physical appearance. My informants often used the phrase *haokan* as an indicator. *Haokan* means to look nice. It can be used to describe something or someone beautiful. For example, “she is very *haokan*” could translate to “she is very beautiful.” In this sense, *haokan* refers to physical beauty. However, a second meaning transforms this physical beauty into proper manners or propriety. For example, when a Taiwanese woman sits with her legs wide open, people would judge her way of sitting as not *haokan*. This judgment is not really because people think she is physically ugly, instead, it is because people judge her sitting manner as violating the proper social expectations of women’s behavior in Taiwan.

Tiange told me,

The major difference is their [non-users] teeth are more *haokan* than ours are. They [non-users] think we are not *haokan* because our lips have red stains and they think we should wipe it off. However, if you chew it long enough then you would not care about it so much, especially if you have already gotten married. A betel nut chewer who is not married may constantly wipe the red stain from his lips because he does not want the girls to think he is a dirty man.

To Tiange, betel nut chewing is not *haokan* based on a physical sense of beauty. That is why, as long as someone has already gotten married, which implies that he does not need to put so much emphasis on physical beauty to attract women, it is not such a big issue.

In fact, this idea of physical beauty as a big disadvantage in betel nut chewing is even better expressed when Tiange told me about the worst part of being a betel nut user. He said,

I think the worst part to me is that I cannot wear nice clothes. It is because whenever I spit betel nut juice, sometimes some betel juice will leave a stain on my clothes and it stays. I have had many [nice] clothes that cost several thousand [NT] dollars but once it gets stains on it then I wear them for work. Therefore, I do not have pretty clothes to wear. I wear those thousand dollar clothes with red stains to work.

Since Tiange is a cement worker, no matter what clothes he wears to work they all will get very dirty and dusty. Even though he can afford nice and expensive clothes, he cannot keep his clothes looking nice. In this sense, chewing betel nut is about giving up the chance to look nice. Giving up here, however, also indicates a self-choice.

When another male informant and I talked about young people chewing betel nut, he said,

I think there are fair enough young people chewing betel nut nowadays, especially in southern Taiwan. [Why more in the South? I asked.] I guess it is because young men in the north care about their appearance more. Unlike we southerners, we are more passionate and direct. We care about appearance less.

This informant implies that people who care about appearance are actually more indirect and are being cold. It indicates that, being a betel nut user, they might not look as nice as a non-user, but they are direct and passionate people because what they care about is not so much outer appearance. As I discussed in Chapter 2, my key informant A-Xiu also expressed a similar attitude. Betel nut chewers think that caring less about their physical appearance, as a result, shows that they are more sincere people, especially as contrasted with those people who only care about physical looks.

In fact, A-Yu once told me that he thinks one contemporary moral issue in Taiwan is that many Taiwanese put too much emphasis on how they look on the outside. He said that many Taiwanese, even if they are heavily in debt, drive Mercedes Benzes and wear Armani. Yet, in reality, they often have to ask around to borrow money. What makes A-Yu most angry is that other people are willing to lend money to such people because lenders think that since they drive Benzes, it must mean they have the ability to pay back the debts and that they just happened to need money for temporary use. Another informant once told me in a joking way that he thinks people who do not chew betel nut are not as trustable as people who do chew it. To my informants, if a person places too much emphasis on how he looks like on the outside, it implies that this person is deceptive and untrustworthy. This kind of people will try to cheat other people by using his looks.

On the contrary, betel nut chewers see themselves as emphasizing inner characteristics rather than the outer ones. In this sense, although they say that being unable to keep a nice physical appearance is the “worst” part of being betel nut chewers, it is not as bad as being an insincere, calculative, and deceptive person. As a result, by not emphasizing how they look outside, it gives them a sense of being honest men. This also parallels my informants’ self-description as being less sophisticated than urban people, but still they keeping *renqingwei*. They therefore claim to show hospitality and sincerity when they interact with people whether they are family members, neighbors, or simply strangers.

Furthermore, by their definition, *haokan* is a subjective judgment related to what you think is beautiful and what you think is not. It is for judging visible appearance. For instance, some people might think long hair on women is more beautiful while others think short hair is. *Haokan* or not depends on personal

preferences for what beautiful is. In this sense, it has nothing to do with modernity and progressiveness, since individual people just have different senses of beauty. It is purely an individual choice since it is impossible to have a “progressive” sense of beauty. By emphasizing the importance of the subjective taste, it eliminate any sense of evolution.

As mentioned in the beginning, however, the underlying meaning of *haokan* refers to proper manners. In this sense, *haokan* or not is not purely a subjective description based on physical beauty. It judges behavior by commonly accepted social norms in deciding what is proper and what is not. I mentioned earlier that many betel nut users have trouble finding Taiwanese spouses. These men could not find Taiwanese spouses not because they are physically ugly (or not *haokan*). It is because their behavior is seen as “improper” for a man of higher social status. Women tend to marry up and betel nut users tend not to qualify. The criteria for this impropriety are contained within the idea of *siwen*. People judge their behavior as improper because they could not show a cultured class image and therefore they are made out as belonging to a less prestigious class—this is why they have difficult finding a Taiwanese spouse.

Framing betel nut chewing as simply individual choice is users’ way to resist mainstream discourse. However, it is not merely an individual choice and it is not only a matter of physical looks. It is a social behavior judged by social standards of what is proper. I do not mean that individuals have no power at all to decide whether they chew betel nut or not, actually it is apparent that individuals do have the choice. Take for instance A-Wang who quit because he would like to be more attractive to women. There is then individual agency in consuming betel nut. Yet, what makes him more attractive is not because he changed his physical appearance. On the contrary,

what he changed was behavior that may be judged as improper or lower class. He made his behavior more acceptable to a majority of Taiwanese women by avoiding a lower class marker—making him more attractive.

However, as mentioned in Chapter 3, betel nut chewing is a part of male group wandering and it is seen as masculine. In this sense, it does not violate social standards from a masculine perspective. In Taiwan, an overly *haokan* man connotes a sense that he is too feminine. If someone were to describe a man as too *haokan*, it implies he is not a “real man” (meaning he lacks masculinity). As I have analyzed in Chapter 3, one justification for consuming betel nut is masculinity. Therefore, when Tiange said that he is not *haokan*, it is not meant as a 100 percent negative self-description. What he actually meant is that yes, chewing betel nut makes me not a nice looking guy, but so what. I am a man and an overly *haokan* man is not masculine anyway. This imagination of masculinity is more based on men’s thoughts, rather than any reference to women’s preferences. It holds, however, because of the centrality of the male group in defining masculinity in relation to other men. Thus being *haokan* or not is not only related to proper social behavior and class, but it is also related to masculinity. All of these factors interact together to create different discourses aiming to justify betel nut chewing.

Energizing Substance

Just as I started fieldwork, a big event hit Taiwan. A 40-year-old man added cyanide into a famous local energy drink, Bullwild,⁵⁹ in order to blackmail the company. However, before he had the chance to send out his blackmail letters, a man

⁵⁹ This is a famous local brand developed by a local company named Paolyta. The drink contains “Inositol, Lycine, Nicotinamide, Vitamin B1, B12, Vitamin C, B-Carotene, Citric Acid, Tartaric Acid, Apple Juice, Sugar, Fructose and Natural Flavors” (<http://www.paolyta.com.tw/english/trade.htm>). This drink is unrelated to Red Bull.

drank a sip of the poisoned Bullwild and died because of it. On the same night, another two people drank poisoned Bullwild at different places in Taiwan and their lives were seriously in danger. This event captured a huge amount of public attention. For several days, all of Taiwan's TV news stations were continuously reporting the so-call "Poisonous Bullwild Incident" following up on police's progress.

This incident became so prominent in Taiwan because it is very common for Taiwanese to consume energy drinks for their work, especially manual laborers. Many Taiwanese manual workers consume energizing substances on a regular daily basis. That is why the "Poisonous Bullwild Incident" and its victims, especially the one who died, drew extreme and intense public attention and compassion. Even those who are not manual laborers felt the threat very close to their daily lives.

Energy drinks, as their name suggests, make people feel energetic and keep them awake. Drinking energy drinks is quite common for not only manual workers but also for anyone as long as they feel physically tired or they need to continue to work in Taiwan. For example, students who need to stay up over night to prepare for exams, white-collar workers who need to work late, people who play online games in Internet cafés over night, party animals who dance the whole night, and gamblers gambling overnight all use them.

In Taiwan, there are two popular types of energizing drinks. First, are liquid drinks without alcohol, such as Bullwild. Second are liquid drinks with alcohol such as *Paolyta B* or *Whisbih*.⁶⁰ Although the consumers of the first type vary, the

⁶⁰ These are two popular local brands. The ingredients are Chinese medicines and some alcohol. By the government's categorization, these two drinks actually count as medicine instead of food. When people drink *Paolyta B* or *Whisbih*, they usually mix other drinks into it. What can be added varies a lot, from soft drinks to sweet coconut milk to beer. Several years ago when I stayed at an aboriginal community in Taidong, I even saw some elder aboriginals adding regular milk into *Paolyta B* or *Whisbih* and they told me that it is very nutritious and good for the body.

consumers of the second are primarily manual laborers, especially people who do heavy manual work such as construction workers or backhoe drivers.

In addition to energy drinks, many Taiwanese consume betel nut for its energizing effects. Yet, as I said earlier, the major consumers of betel nut are working class Taiwanese men. White-collar male workers who work in offices seldom consume it as a way of energizing and non-aborigines women, whether she is a blue-collar worker or a white-collar worker, would not chew betel nut for energizing. In fact, Thau-ke once told me that anyone who drinks *Paolyta B* or *Whisbih*, will also chew betel nut. Indeed, from my fieldwork site at least, almost all the people who drink *Paolyta B* or *Whisbih* also consume betel nut.

Other than the above substances, drinking coffee is actually also very popular in Taiwan. However, the major consumers of coffee are urban middle class residents (both men and women). Working class Taiwanese consume much less coffee. Taiwanese also use tobacco for energizing although it is often considered too weak. Therefore, the energizing role of tobacco is quite insignificant.

It is important to locate betel nut consumption in the realm of energizing substances. Many informants actually had two steps to becoming betel nut users. The first step is what I explored in Chapter 3 under the section on male group wandering activity and usually happened while they were teenagers. In general, they were not yet regular chewers during this stage. The second stage is the key to make them become habitual consumers and it often happened after they had “entered society.” My informants consume betel nut for its practical function that is its energizing effect. A need for an energizing substance is therefore an essential factor in them becoming habitual users.

In the Name of Work

My informants, both users and non-users, constantly told me, “betel nut can energize people (*binlang keyi tishen* 檳榔可以提神).” They use the word *tishen* for energizing. *Tishen* literally means, “raise up the spirit.” When A-Yu was a truck driver, he consumed a lot of betel nuts and energizing drinks (*Paolyta B* and *Whisbih*). He told me, “I had to since I didn’t have enough sleep everyday. I consume less since I quit the driving job.” If he wanted to finish his work well (both indicating finishing deliveries and driving safely through the whole night), he had to do something to maintain or push up his spirit. This is despite the fact that he already lacked sleep and therefore probably should not have continued driving. Without consuming betel nut and energizing drinks, he might not only be unable to finish his work, but also he could die on the highway due to a car accident.

Tiange also used to consume betel nut and energizing drinks a lot—much more than now—when he was young. He said,

I do construction work. At that time, Taiwan’s economy was very good. There were many construction jobs. I worked at least 8 hours each day. They [energizing substances] make me less tired. I can keep working and not get tired.

Tiange had a very practical need for consuming betel nut habitually. He needed energizing substances in order to deal with his heavy manual workload each day. Without it, he felt it would be unlikely for him to get through a whole day of work. He told me that he used to be a contractor for other companies. Construction work often has many small contractors doing different parts of the construction. Tiange thus worked for himself. He said, the more you worked, the more money you got. “Of course,” you would try all the ways you could to work more and to work longer and therefore make more money.

Another informant who had chewed betel nut for a while, but did not currently, told me,

I had quit [betel nut chewing] for a long time. I chewed it for more than one year because my work was different [compared with the now]. I worked the night shift and morning shift at that time. It [betel nut] could energize me. My working hours were very long. Betel nut chewing made me feel the time passed faster and I felt less tired. I stopped chewing it when I changed jobs...If I didn't do that job, I would not chew it. It is because of work. I really needed it. I was exhausted...I only chewed it at work. I didn't chew it at home. I had to chew it because otherwise I didn't have enough energy to work...My wife knew it. She didn't say anything about it since I didn't chew it at home. There was no other solution and she could understand it.

His comments show several important aspects in relation to the energizing role of betel nut. First, he chewed it when he did a night shift and a job with long working hours. This made his betel nut chewing “for the sake of working and working longer.” He did not chew it for pursuing some kind of personal pleasure. He did it for increasing productivity. To him, as long as he consumed it for work, it then was not a “bad” or immoral habit. Therefore, even his wife, who usually would not appreciate betel nut chewing (because women in general dislike it), could “understand” and accept his behavior—he did it in order to work harder and therefore in order to provide his family with economic resources.

From his comments, betel nut chewing is perfectly legitimate as long as it is consumed for its energizing effects therefore allowing one to work harder and longer. In fact, he is not the only one who told me that, for the sake of work, even wives who usually argued against betel nut chewing would accept it. An informant who is a medicine salesperson told me, “my wife can understand that I have to chew it because of my work. I chew it for the need of work. She can accept it as long as I do not chew it at home and I brush my teeth after I get home.” In this sense, the justification of work is so powerful that even women are willing to accept it as a necessity.

Here I want to bring back the idea of the masculinity from Chapter 3 again. As I mentioned, to betel nut users, practicing masculinity in the home means being the breadwinner for the family. This masculine role, by needing energizing substances, justified betel nut consumption on the one hand, and on the other, it obscures their class position. As a result, the reason for them to consume betel nut is that they need to be seen as a real man at home. Their marginal economic position is therefore missing in this framework. We do not see an awareness of class inequality from their statements, what we see is how much they try to be a real man for their family as well as how masculine they are while they conquer the toughness, tiredness, and boredom of their manual work.

One informant actually told me, “Everyone has their own excuse for consuming those things, such as *tishen*.” As an “excuse,” doing it for the sake of work is the most common one and the one providing the most legitimacy. I want to highlight a further point from the above statements: that there is an attitude of “have to.” They describe their chewing of betel nut as due to “having to” or “having no other solutions” for work. This implies that they lack other choices. This shows both their determination to work hard and a reason why betel nut is necessary in relation to work. Why, however, do they “have to”? To understand this, it is important to bring the Taiwanese work ethic into this analysis.

Emphasizing a good work ethic is essential in Taiwanese culture. This applies to both working class as well as middle class workers. Many of my middle class friends, whether they are journalists in newspapers, editors in magazines, activists in non-governmental organizations, assistants of legislators, or on-line game designers all enthusiastically talk about how much work they have to do everyday and how hard working they are. In fact, they actually do spend a lot of time working, not just talking

about it. Although their way of talking about working is often expressed as complaints, they see such work as necessary and are even generally proud of their work ethic.

As for the working class, as I just described above, the emphasis on work ethic is something they “have to” do. It is not necessarily about having to make money for survival since, as I described earlier, betel nut users are not in the lowest income level in Taiwan. It is about their “Taiwanese” values and morality. A-Yu and I once had a conversation about his marriage problems. He said he would think about marrying a Vietnamese woman if he cannot find a Taiwanese spouse. I asked him why not marry a woman from mainland China since they share the same spoken language. He said that he did not want to because “women from mainland China only want to make money without working hard.” He thinks Vietnamese are more like the “traditional” Taiwanese who are willing to work hard. To him, the major point is a willingness to work hard. Making money is almost secondary to this work ethic. Despite the fact that his comments on women from mainland China and Vietnam are problematic and more of stereotype than truth in Taiwan, they show how important the work ethic is to him and to many other Taiwanese as well.

In this sense, it is important to locate the need for energizing substances in a larger cultural context. Whether Taiwanese really work hard or not (they do in many cases, but so do people in other countries), there is a consensus that a good work ethic is one of the most important moral aspects of Taiwanese culture. As long as a behavior is conducted under or in the name of work, it then can be legitimated even if the behavior itself is morally ambiguous. One example of this is flower drinking behavior (going to hostess clubs). Festa (2006) describes this as very common for Taiwanese men of all classes, yet, it is also a morally controversial practice in Taiwan. Many of these men, however, are able to justify it as a part of cultivating business and

working relationships. However, Festa notes that “doing it for work” is merely an ideological justification used by both men and women since, from his observations, men did not work in hostess bars. My intention here is to show how the idea of “in the name of work” is more of an ideology that is used to legitimate many (sometimes morally ambiguous) behaviors in Taiwanese culture than real necessity for work.

The effect of *tishen*, therefore increasing productivity and working hours, is a very powerful discourse used by informants as a justification. Many people (including non-users) describe this as the only “advantage” to betel nut chewing. Even a person like Chejie, who strongly disliked it, said “I know some people have to do it because of their work, such as truck drivers.” She then said, “But I think it is not right if people chew betel nut just because they want to gamble all night.”

One thing that needs to be clarified here is that in Taiwan, people see energizing substances as adding to work rather than as a kind of substance dependence. These stimulants allow already hard working people to finish their work and to do more work. People do not see them as “lazy” people who need to depend on a stimulant so as to finish any work at all. I do not mean that Taiwanese think any stimulant substance can be good as long as it is for work. Instead, what I mean is that certain stimulant substances are not considered negative as long as their use is limited to improving productivity. On the contrary, if the same stimulant substances are used for other purposes than work, they are considered negative. That is why Chejie expressed such strong disgust for people consuming betel nut for gambling.

The Contestation of Class

When I first met Thau-ke and talked about my research, he told me, with a disbelieving tone of voice, that a couple of days before he had seen a professor on TV

defending betel nut chewing. He kept emphasizing that it was a “professor” doing so. The next thing he said, however, was that he thought professors also go flower drinking too. The surprising part to him was the “professor/scholar,” who presumably is not supposed to do such things, both chewing betel nut and going to hostess bar, would advocate for one of them so openly. According to the stereotype, this was so surprising because well-educated people are not supposed to consume betel nut. This is because educational level plays a crucial role in determining class in Taiwanese society.

An informant who does not chew betel nut regularly, but does chew it occasionally for social occasions, said,

In short, the more education you have, the less likely you are to chew betel nut. It is *impossible* for a doctor [of western medicine] to chew betel nut. Chinese medicine doctors might chew it, yet even so, they’d chew it at home [instead of in public]. Civil servants would not chew it unless friends give it to them when they hang out together after work. Officials who are in high positions would not chew it unless they are the kind of people who used to be gangsters before being elected as legislators.

In Taiwan, western medical doctors have had a very high social status since the Japanese rule when one of the few subjects that Taiwanese elites were allowed to study was Western medicine. In addition, Western medicine remains one of the hardest disciplines to get into in the existing university exam system. Therefore, to him, if someone has such a high degree, it would be impossible for him to chew it.

Although there are some highly educated Taiwanese who chew betel nut, there choice should be seen in a very different cultural context. During the 1980s when Taiwan was undergoing its political transition, there were constantly social movements happening advocating for rights, including aborigines, farmers, laborers, women, gay and most important of all, the democracy movements. All of those movements, to a certain degree, were accompanied by the construction of a

Taiwanese identity. Betel nut was often present in these marches and is seen as a symbol of workers, native Taiwan, and grassroots people. I will explore the connection of being native and grassroots in detail in the next chapter. Pan (2001) indicates that because the symbolic meaning of betel nut, intellectuals who support these social movements often chew betel nut as a way to express their identification with these more marginal people. In this sense, highly educated Taiwanese chew betel nut for its symbolic meaning in relation to expressing their cultural identity.

Nevertheless, most betel nut consumers, as I have mentioned, have an educational level only just “high” enough to be an average Taiwanese. Their educational level is enough to keep them from becoming poor since the poorest Taiwanese cannot afford betel nut consumption. In this sense, the stereotype of “betel nut users as less educated,” is true to a certain degree. They are relatively less educated. They are not however, the least educated people. This is a relative concept.

It is important to examine how education plays a role in relation to betel nut usage because the discourse of *siwen* that is created by betel nut users is about differences in educational level. When my informants frame betel nut consumption as a matter of being *siwen* or not, on the one hand it is their way to avoid class categorizations yet on the other, the nature of the *siwen* concept already articulates a class distinction. Since the idea of *siwen* contains both an image of a Confucian scholar and a cultured or educated image, it defines class from a cultural perspective.

To betel nut users, by creating the *siwen* discourse, they “simplify” it by not seeing the group nature of *siwen* people as a class, and instead choosing to see *siwen* people as individuals who have certain personalities. In other words, they create a discourse to deny class, while at the same time, this discourse also reveals the class

nature. This class element is based in using cultural ideas to differentiate people rather than economic or structural ones.

A question then arises as to why they deny the class implications. Firstly, it is because their counter discourses created to rebel against the mainstream discourses are based on the idea of individualism. Individualism, furthermore, is a strong position to start from because of its connection to modernity, a moral positive in Taiwan. If they do not deny the nature of class in betel nut consumption, then they are unable to make use of such counter discourses. Whether it is about differences in personal hygienic habits (some people are more hygienic than others), individual choice (they choose to chew betel nut as it is interesting to them personally), or work ethic (they chew it for working harder and longer), all are meant to reveal a sense of individualism. Betel nut users' reason for doing so is because they know betel nut chewing is a class issue. In order to deny that their chewing is due to their class position, they seek individualistic reasons to explain why they chew betel nut.

Furthermore, it is important to bring a historical perspective in relation to class distinction in Taiwan. Robert Weller (1994) shows how Taiwanese desperately sought to stay out of the working class in the late 1980s and early 1990s when there was increasing class differentiation in Taiwan. The rise of betel nut consumption, however, reveals the formation of a working class culture in Taiwan. Yet, many Taiwanese, including my betel nut user informants are uncomfortable about this idea of class distinction and particularly with the fact that they are in the working class. They do not want to emphasize the class nature of consuming betel nut and therefore keep focusing on individualism. They described themselves as people who do manual labor, but not in a class sense. For petty capitalists like Thau-ke, he even did not think of himself as doing manual work because, as he told me, he is doing business and

therefore needs to use brains instead of muscles to run the shop. They deliberately make betel nut chewing into individual choice because, in reality class differentiation is the key for consuming betel nut. Class, on a social level, is the fundamental aspect of consuming betel nut and this is why it is so important for betel nut users to create a discourse to resist and deny class implications.

This working class culture, unlike the United States and Britain, was *not* born in the context of working in factories. Instead, this working class culture was born in the context of small family businesses. This difference leads to a significant consequence in relation to class distinction in Taiwan. When the working class was formed in a factory context, there is a clear exploitive relationship in relation to the capitalist and the worker. However, in Taiwan's context, there is no such obvious role assigned to "the exploiter" and "the exploited," at least for Taiwanese men.

Meanwhile, there is one commonality between these different working class cultures—an emphasis on masculinity. Whether it is through the idea of overly *haokan* men being seen as feminine, or extremely *siwen* men as not masculine, masculinity and class intersect here. As a result, masculinity suspends and justifies their class position. To betel nut users, the chewing of betel nut is then a matter of being a real man in Taiwan (both being masculine and being the breadwinner at home), it then obscures their marginal position in relation to economic and political structure.

Chapter 5: Social identity and Betel nut

Two Myths

Huang Wanchuan says, “the symbolic meanings of betel nut culture are boldness and generosity, brotherliness and friendliness, hard working, and down-to-earth. Betel nut culture represents a part of local Taiwanese culture” (1995: 65). Pan Meiling describes betel nut as a symbol of “native” (*bentu* 本土) and “grassroots” (*caogen* 草根) Taiwan (2002: 225). My informants further told me that betel nut is a Taiwan specialty (*techan* 特產) or a local specialty (*tuchan* 土產). When my informants refer to local specialty, the “local” here less refers to the specific place where I did my research, Pingdong, and instead, they mean Taiwan. Taiwan here is local as compared to other places in the world such as Hong Kong, mainland China, or the United States. Meanwhile, as I mentioned several times, many people in Taiwan despise betel nut chewing and think it is one of the most embarrassing elements of Taiwanese culture. This is the first myth about betel nut in Taiwan.

Betel nut is something representing “Taiwan,” despite the fact that many Taiwanese also feel that betel nut represents a shameful part of Taiwan. Why is there a contradiction here? What is the actual meaning of “betel nut represents native and grassroots?” How can we explain this contradiction?

The second myth this chapter will concern itself with is the “origin myth” of betel nut consumption. Just several days after I started my participant observation in the Garden, Thau-ke-niu told me that she had already taught me everything there was to know about betel nut, at least every thing she knew. She said if I wanted to know more, I should interview Aborigines, especially older aboriginals. She further

indicated that this is because the origin of betel nut chewing is with the Aborigines and therefore they should know more about it. Not only Thau-ke-niu, but also many other informants made this same statement. Many informants, whether they chewed it or not, stated that native Taiwanese had learned betel nut chewing from the Aborigines. People constantly told me that I should trace its origins “back” to the current Aborigines in order to “really” understand it. They suggested to go to an aboriginal community to do my research since they have knowledge that is more authentic than native Taiwanese. In reality, however, the Aborigines and native Taiwanese consume betel nut in different cultural and social contexts. Betel nut chewing in these different cultures contains different social meanings. In this sense, I would actually be unable to understand what betel nut means to native Taiwanese by doing fieldwork in an aboriginal community. Nevertheless, why did my informants constantly make this statement? What is the intention behind claiming an Aboriginal origin? What does this mean and how can we explain it?

In order to understand these two myths that relate to different ethnic groups in Taiwan, we need to examine how different ethnicities and social identities are linked to betel nut consumption. Furthermore, how these linkages are located in a larger national context of identity politics in Taiwan. In this chapter, I will explore how social identity is articulated in betel nut consumption in the process of solving these two betel nut myths.

Framework of Ethnic Relations in Taiwan

For analytical reasons, I have separated Taiwan’s ethnic groups into two binary pairs in this chapter. The first of these binary pairs is native Taiwanese versus mainlanders and the second is the Aborigines versus native Taiwanese. In Taiwan,

when people refer to the so-called “original provenance complex,” or *shengji qingjie* (省籍情節), they primarily mean to describe the ambivalent relationship between native Taiwanese and mainlanders. When people refer to the “*yuan* Han conflict,”⁶¹ although mainlanders are also Han people, they are specifically referring to the conflict between native Taiwanese and the aborigines. This is because these two binary comparisons have been situated in different historical, and therefore political, contexts. Before the KMT and mainlanders went to Taiwan in 1945, there were two major ethnic kinds of conflict in Taiwan, one was native Taiwanese against the Aborigines and the other was within the Native Taiwanese—Holo versus Hakka. After the KMT and mainlanders went to Taiwan, then the major conflict became one between native Taiwanese and mainlanders since the mainlanders were newcomers and a minority but controlled Taiwan.

To separate ethnic relations into two binary pairs, to a certain degree, simplifies the complexity of ethnic relationships in reality. For example, after the KMT took over Taiwan, the Aborigines, in order to resist native Taiwanese oppression, cooperated with the mainlanders both politically and in daily life, as seen through constant inter-marriage between them. Another example of this complexity is that, within the native Taiwanese group, in order to resist mainlanders, Holo and Hakka people cooperated to a certain extent. Yet Hakka also cooperated with mainlanders as a way to resist Holo domination. My intention is to show that in reality the ethnic relations are far more complicated than the way I frame them here. However, these two binary pairs are valuable as an analytical tool which also, to a certain degree, reflects how people think about ethnic relations in the larger context. It is just worth keeping in mind that these two frameworks cannot fully represent reality.

⁶¹ *Yuan* (原), literally meaning Aborigines, is short for *yuanzhumin* (原住民).

They can only grasp some crucial aspects of ethnic relations and social identity in Taiwan.

Native Taiwanese vs. Mainlanders

The Story of *Taike*

Right before I finished my fieldwork, two big news events happened that grasped the whole nation's attention. The first one was related to the winner of the Miss Taiwan Beauty Contest. After the winner was announced, some journalists wrote articles criticizing her as "*taimei* (台妹)" which means roughly "Taiwanese chick." They thought she was "too *tai*" because her Mandarin had a Holo accent. The second news event was of the upcoming rock-and-roll concert, named "*Taike* Rock-and-Roll Concert." *Taike* (台客) literally means "Taiwan and guest." The actual meaning of these two characters and their origins are crucial parts of the *taike* discourse and are still both ambiguous and contested. Nevertheless, neither the Miss Taiwan Beauty Contest nor the rock-and-roll concert would have been such a big thing in the past. Yet, all of a sudden, they sparked a media frenzy. The two things are not isolated events, but are seen together because they share the same label. *Taimei* is a female version of *taike*.

So, what is *taike*? Some people say *taike* means Taiwan (Holo) and Hakka. Mainlanders created this term to describe "uncouth" native Taiwanese so therefore it is discrimination. Other people say *taike* is sort of like "new money"—they are show off's, but have no taste. Still others say *taike* refers to a lifestyle such as a way of dressing and talking or a kind of attitude such as "be yourself." *Taike* is similar with "redneck" in the U.S—uncouth, but also an emerging positive identity used by

insiders. By discussing what *taike* is, people in Taiwan try to redefine it as a new, specifically Taiwanese, identity.

Despite the intention and action to subvert the originally meaning of *taike*, *taike*, in general, usually refers to people who are “uncouth and vulgar.” In this sense, it is not hard to understand, that when people describe someone as “too *tai* (*taitai* 太台),” “very *tai* (*hentai* 很台)” or “too much *tai* style (*taiwei taizhong* 台味太重),” it is meant as a negative description. That is why in the debate over *taike*, some people were very upset about the usage of *taike* and *tai* related descriptions. They saw it as discrimination against native Taiwanese and their culture. In this sense, the debate over *taike* could be seen as analogous to the redefinition of “Nigger” for African Americans. That is to say, the term itself is used as a negative and discriminatory term, however, in contemporary times, some people have tried to appropriate it and then subvert it as a new way to self-identify themselves.

Nevertheless, the debate over *taike* and the construction of *taike* as a new identity is an on going process. So far, there is no single agreed upon source to tell us what *taike* used to mean and what *taike* means now. Regardless of how it turns out, one thing is certain, *taike* represents something about Taiwan and Taiwanese identity. This “Taiwanese” identity is situated within the native Taiwanese-mainlander framework. It is therefore between Taiwanese identity and “Chinese identity,” rather than between native Taiwanese and the Aborigines.

Although there are different versions of what *taike* was and what *taike* is among local people as well as intellectuals who try to redefine *taike*, this does not mean there is no roughly acceptable imagination of *taike*. More precisely speaking, there are some well-known “stereotypes” among Taiwanese in relation to *taike*. Within these stereotypes, there are certain cultural traits that most people immediately

link to *taike*. For the younger generation *taike*, listening to Hong Kong techno and dressing like “fake” Hip-pop are important traits. The more traditional version, which is also the “orthodox stereotype” of *taike* which makes them uncouth and vulgar, involves chewing betel nut, wearing flip-flops, and speaking Taiwan *guoyu* (國語). *Guoyu* literally is national language, which in Taiwan is Mandarin. Taiwan *guoyu* is Mandarin with strong Holo accent. In Taiwan, due to the KMT ideology, Mandarin with a strong Holo accent is seen as a marker of less education and vulgarity. Meanwhile, for women, Taiwan *guoyu* is seen as making her sexually less attractive. A typical joke about women with Taiwan *guoyu* is to describe how a man sees a beautiful and elegant woman and begins to fantasize about her. However, as soon as this woman talks, it turns out she has Taiwan *guoyu* and the man’s fantasy is totally ruined. This stereotype plays an important role in explaining why Miss Taiwan was criticized as not being qualified to be the new Miss Taiwan.

In the process of this new trend which aims to subvert and redefine *taike*, one thing some people have been trying to do is to exclude betel nut chewing from the image of *taike*. This is, of course, only one of many voices in the *taike* debate. These people try to make the distinction that a *taike* does not necessarily have to be a betel nut chewer. This shows, again, the embarrassment that betel nut chewing evokes as far as being Taiwanese and constructing Taiwanese identity. People feel so bad about it that even though it was a crucial distinguishing element of *taike*, they feel there is a need to exclude it in the process of redefining *taike* as a new Taiwanese identity. This exclusion shows the ambiguous and embarrassing role of betel nut for being Taiwanese, but meanwhile their need to address it specifically also points out the crucial role that betel nut chewing has played in Taiwanese identity.

Two Nationalisms, Two Identities

In order to explain the above phenomenon, it is important to situate betel nut consumption in the framework of differences between native Taiwanese and mainlanders over social identity. In Taiwan, there are two major social identities that compete against each other. The first one is “Chinese identity” based on KMT ideology and the second one is “Taiwanese identity” based on DPP (Democratic Progressive Party) ideology. These identities are fundamental components of “Chinese nationalism” and “Taiwanese nationalism” respectively.

When the KMT took Taiwan from Japan, one of the first things they needed to do was to sinicize Taiwan. The KMT thought Taiwanese at that time were too much like Japanese (instead of Chinese). More importantly, sinicizing Taiwanese was a way to claim that all Taiwanese are Chinese and thus was essential for the legitimacy of the KMT. First, this is because it allowed the KMT, as an outsider, to take over Taiwan “legitimately” because Taiwan was a part of “China” and the KMT was the government that represented this “China.” Secondly, it justified the goal of the KMT after its retreat to Taiwan. Its goal was to retake mainland China from the Communists (PRC) and since all Taiwanese are “Chinese” they therefore should feel obligated to “rescue” their compatriots on the mainland China. Therefore the KMT constructed its “Chinese identity” to support the “Chinese nationalism” on Taiwan ever since they took over Taiwan. One thing that needs to be clarified is that although this is called “Chinese identity” and “Chinese nationalism,” it is based on KMT ideology (of a Republican China under the KMT rule) which is not the same as the “Chinese nationalism” claimed on mainland China that is based on PRC ideology.

Under this Chinese nationalism, the KMT was able to practice its authoritarian rule on Taiwan while focusing on retaking and “representing” all of China. The KMT

tightly controlled political opposition, freedom of speech, and most important of all, oppressed any local identity. Since the 1970s, however, there was an increasingly strong voice in support of “Taiwan independence” as a way to gain democracy. The main members in this opposition force later formed the DPP to challenge the KMT’s one-party state. In order to legitimate “Taiwanese nationalism,” which is the opposite of “Chinese nationalism,” one of the most important steps was to construct a “Taiwanese identity.” That is to claim that Taiwan belongs to Taiwanese and Taiwanese are ethnically different from “Chinese.”

To a large extent, the above two identities are based on different ethnicities. The Chinese identity is based on mainlanders and the Taiwanese identity is based on native Taiwanese. There are many anthropologists who have noticed the importance of ethnicity in relation to social identity in Taiwan (e.g. Gates 1981, Bosco 1992, Weller 1999, and Simon 2003). This is not, however, to say that ethnicity is the determining factor of social identity. Things like class (e.g. Gates 1981; Hsiao 1993), social experience (e.g. Brown 2004), and gender all play roles determining social identity. Therefore, someone who is native Taiwanese could have a social identity more identifying with mainlanders or a mainlanders could have social identity which identified more with native Taiwanese depending on both individual and social contexts. It is again worth keeping in mind that the linkage of ethnicity and social identity in reality is just one of many factors in determining social identity. Nevertheless, ethnicity is still one of the most important factors in understanding social identity in Taiwan both historically and politically.

Locality and Nationalism

As I analyzed in Chapter 2, a majority of Taiwanese despise betel nut consumption and see it as a kind of “cancer of Taiwan.” I have also described how most Taiwanese see betel nut as a kind of “cultural survival”—something which has “accidentally” remained after the evolutionary process—in the history of Taiwanese culture. Meanwhile, whether people oppose it or not, many Taiwanese admit that betel nut represents native and grassroots Taiwan. This is partly because people see it as a traditional custom practiced on the island for a long time. A-Wang said, “betel nut is Taiwan’s custom. It is traditional culture. It is only in Taiwan... Betel palms are planted all over Taiwan and have been for a long time in Taiwan’s history.” To A-Wang, betel nut is a part of “traditional” local practice and it has a lot to do with it having been grown locally for such a long time.

Tiange said,

I think foreigners would think our Taiwanese people’s betel nut chewing is very strange. Why do we Taiwanese chew it? I think it is totally because we produce it locally. I do not know whether there are betel palms in the USA, even if there are, Americans probably do not know you can chew it. We Taiwanese eat everything we see...Betel palms have existed for a long time in Taiwan. Of course, we would chew it. My grandpa chewed it, too.

Both A-Wang and Tiange refer to betel nut as a part of “local Taiwan.” Tiange explained that just by having betel palms on the island Taiwanese would eventually find that is edible. He therefore thinks that of course, betel nut chewing would become a part of local tradition here, but not a part of the traditions of another place.

These statements all indicate a very strong version of locality in relation to consuming betel nut. To my informants, the reason why Taiwanese chew betel nut, as compared to people in other parts of the world, is quite simple. It is because betel palms have grown locally for a long time here and therefore it “naturally” became a

part of local traditional customs. Since it is a local tradition, of course, local people follow it. In other words, the time-space dimension, calling on history and geography, is at the core of how betel nut is a symbol of locality in Taiwan.

Emphasizing locality and local traditions is a crucial step in constructing Taiwanese identity. Before the rise of Taiwanese identity, the dominating KMT ideology saw local Taiwanese culture as a marginal, vulgar, and “less developed” part of Chinese culture. In this dominant ideology, “Chinese culture,” especially the “Chinese culture based in Beijing” was the center, a well-developed and refined culture. This ideology, transmitted through the educational system, has been built up among all Taiwanese, whether they are decedents from mainlanders or native Taiwanese. This discourse made local Taiwanese culture not as “worthy” as “Chinese culture.” Under this ideology, any local Taiwanese culture, customs, or traditions were often seen as vulgar versions at the margins of Chinese culture. Thus, when for the very first time Taiwanese opera was played in a national level theater, it was seen as a big step toward subverting this cultural domination instilled under KMT ideology. Before that, only Beijing opera or foreign plays were “qualified” to be performed in the national level theaters because they, as opposed to Taiwanese opera, were seen as “fine” art.

Locality, grassroots, and native are highly desirable characteristics in the contemporary era for resisting the previously dominant KMT ideology as well as constructing Taiwanese identity. After the 1990s, the so-called localist fever (*xiangtu re*) spread through many aspects of Taiwanese daily life. For example, teaching local culture and language in the formal school systems, organizing trips to the countryside to learn more about farming and aboriginal life, increasing Taiwanese operas and puppet shows on TV and in formal theaters, and increasing Taiwanese languages

(Hakka, Holo, and different aborigines languages) on TV programs were all parts of this localist fever. This was not only simply a matter of being nostalgic for tradition in a modern society, but also a key element of building Taiwanese identity, especially as contrasted with Chinese identity.

Yet, if something is a symbol of locality and people just dislike this symbol, this alone would not make it so controversial. For example, people might think of redneck as a symbol of the southern United State. Southerners may dislike this symbol, but this does not contradict being an American and being nationalistic about it. However, it does become controversial when the locality itself is a valuable element, a politically correct thing, and an essential source of nationalism. In this sense, Taiwanese desire to build their own nationalism and to build this nationalism through locality. As with betel nut, however, when this symbol of locality is seen as a shameful cultural practice, it then becomes a paradox.

Ethnicity and Betel Nut Chewing

One way to unpack this paradox is to see how people link betel nut with ethnic groups. This helps us to understand why betel nut is a symbol of locality, instead of being a symbol of age for instance. There is a strong tendency to connect some ethnic groups with betel nut chewing. Almost all informants told me that, by percentage, aborigines have the highest betel nut chewing rate and mainlanders have the lowest. People always refer to betel nut as a part of aboriginal culture and tradition. This is actually the same way they explain why native Taiwanese chew betel nut. This therefore explains the aborigines' perceived higher chewing rate while also legitimizing female aborigines chewing behavior. I will examine the connection between aborigines and betel nut in detail in the next section.

Some informants claim betel nut chewing is highly related to native Taiwanese culture, for example A-Wang stated that both aborigines and native Taiwanese all have fairly high chewing rates because it is an ethnic tradition for them. He said, “Hakka, Holo, and the Aborigine people all chew betel nut a lot. They are about the same. Only less mainlanders chew it. It is [our ethnic] tradition.”

Mainlanders are perceived as having the lowest betel nut chewing rate. One informant told me mainlanders do not chew betel nut because their fathers and grandfathers do not chew it. They do not have this tradition because they “were not born on this island.” Another male informant said,

It is because mainlanders came to Taiwan the latest. Although there is betel nut chewing in mainland China, it is not popular. Betel nut is more popular in Taiwan, therefore, they [first generation mainlanders] do not have this habit when they came to Taiwan. For younger generation mainlanders, they tend not to chew betel nut because their fathers were more strict [than native Taiwanese].

A-Yu also has a similar idea, he said,

Mainlanders may be influenced by their elders. Their elders came from mainland China. They don’t chew betel nut there. So, if they chew it, their elders may blame them.

These statements point out an intention to claim a cultural difference between mainlanders and native Taiwanese based on different “traditions” or “customs” due to different spatial origins, and localities. Furthermore, this locality, as a result, leads to an idea of different ethnic cultures. My informants think of betel nut chewing as traditional culture inherited from earlier generations within ethnic groups. Therefore, native Taiwanese chew it, but the first generation of mainlanders did not.

Tying betel nut consumption with locality is very important to explain the linkage between ethnicity and betel nut chewing. Based on this locality, people then

distinguish different groups of people by how much they have adopted aspects of this locality and therefore how much they share the same ethnic culture.

Constructing Ethnicity, Competing Discourses

One informant claims there is more tension in the relationship between mainlanders and native Taiwanese over betel nut chewing. He said,

Mainlanders do not chew it because they look down on it. Mainlanders often think they are superior because they thought they built our nation and they own the nation. ... We are the local people and our ancestors have chewed betel nut for several generations. They [mainlanders] are the outsiders.

He emphasizes that mainlanders do not chew betel nut because of their superiority which came from the fact that they came to Taiwan with “the government.” In fact, his words are not entirely stereotypical. During fieldwork, I met a mainlander in Pingdong City. He was fifty something and grew up in the military villages. As soon as he found out why I was in Pingdong, he said, “Betel nut, in short, has nothing good about it.” That was his only comment about betel nut and my research.

Since one important source for different ethnicities is based on the idea of locality, this then allows the possibility of change as long as the new generation is born and socialized into the new locality. A-Yu said,

Gradually the second and third generation of mainlanders will chew it because their senior generation was born in Taiwan already. They gradually would accept local culture. Only the first generation couldn't accept it.

A-Yu's words actually point to a mainstream expectation of mainlanders, that is, that their second or third generations should be more “native Taiwanese” than “Chinese” because they were all born in the same place. They inherit traditions both from where

they were born and where they live. They thus would adopt local culture much more than their parent's generation.

The same informant who asserted that mainlanders look down on native Taiwanese further indicated,

Taiwanization is to identify with Taiwan.⁶² Take mainlanders as an example. The first generation of mainlanders retreated to Taiwan. I could not expect them to identify with Taiwan. However, for the second and third generations, they were born in Taiwan, ate Taiwanese rice, drank Taiwanese water and were educated here. Therefore, they should identify with Taiwan. ... Taiwanization has nothing to do with aborigines because Taiwan is theirs (the Aborigines). ...It is also not an issue to Holo and Hakka ethnic groups. It is only an issue to the outsider ethnic group [mainlanders].

To him, mainlanders look down on betel nut due to their different ethnicities and therefore their different social identities. I do not mean that he thinks mainlanders should chew betel nut, but he does claim that descendents of mainlanders should change their identity and adopt local culture since they were born locally. To him, betel nut is a symbol that represents local Taiwan. Mainlanders should not look down on Taiwanese cultural practices thinking that Chinese culture is more delicate and superior than Taiwanese culture which is lower class, uncouth, and inferior. What he actually meant, and what is also the expectation of many native Taiwanese of mainlanders, is that the second and third generation of mainlanders should be a part of and embrace locality, therefore identifying with Taiwan, just like the native Taiwanese. To him, being willing to accept betel nut chewing is a way to subvert the cultural hegemony that the KMT imposed on everyone on Taiwan.

In this sense, there are then two ways to form "ethnic traditions." One is the one that is inherited from one's parents' generation and the other is the one that is inherited from the local place, or the actual living environment. From a native

⁶² "Bentuhua jiushi rentong Taiwan" (本土化就是認同台灣).

Taiwanese perspective, social identity based on ethnicity therefore is changeable through time and space, and to a certain degree, it should change.

It looks contradictory when we see how betel nut can be both the cancer of Taiwan as well as a highly desirable symbol of locality at the same time. However, this is not paradoxical once we situate these two discourses in the framework of two competing identities—native Taiwanese as a new and emerging identity and mainlanders representing “Chinese identity” based on the KMT’s ideology. There are thus two competing ideologies that represent two different social identities in Taiwan. The contestation of betel nut consumption is the result of these two ongoing processes of building social identity.

Ethnicity, Social Identity, and Class

I have analyzed the relationship between ethnicity and social identity in terms of betel nut usage. Yet, this analysis is not yet complete. As I mentioned earlier, the mainlanders’ domination was backed by the state. It is important to address the role of the state because it shows that ethnic difference is not simply ethnic difference. The difference follows along lines of class as well. Mainlanders have had a structural advantage in Taiwanese society because of the role of the state. For example, mainlanders occupy a disproportionate number of jobs in certain social sectors such as public servants, teachers, and military sectors. Gates (1981) indicates that there were significantly fewer mainlanders in the lowest class in Taiwan. She points out that although the first generation of mainlanders were not all rich, their descendants were able to move up into higher classes through their parents’ social connections. Wu Naide points out that “mainlanders are concentrated in the middle and upper class”(1997:154). He further indicates that “the rate of mainlanders in the upper class

is twice that of native Taiwanese” (*ibid.*). Cai Shuling (1989) found that mainlanders also subjectively identify themselves as middle class at the highest rate. She further shows that ethnicity is a very important factor in how people decide their class subjectively.

In other words, it is analytically very important to bring class back into the discussion of social identity and ethnicity in betel nut consumption. However, when people explain betel nut chewing in terms of different ethnic groups, this often serves to obscure the role of class that is intertwined with social identity.

Chejie said that “most mainlanders are public servants, schoolteachers, or in the military. You do not need to chew betel nut if you do these kinds of jobs.” Although her words were meant to speak of ethnic difference as expressed in the form of occupational difference, they also indicate a class distinction because such typical mainland jobs are also the typical middle class jobs in Taiwan. Furthermore, one hidden factor is the social welfare benefits provided with these jobs. In Taiwan, the government is the “boss” for all of the above jobs. The monthly salary is not significantly higher than that of people who work in the private sector, but these government employees can get educational funding through the government for their children. Wu (1997) shows that this educational welfare has been crucial for determining the next generation’s class position.

My intention here is to show that when people explain the difference based on ethnicity, it often obscures class factors that lie underneath ethnicity. Wu (1997) described a popular saying during elections for the Mayor of Taipei City in 1994. The saying is: the supporters of the DPP are people wearing flip-flops and chewing betel nut, yet the supporters of the New Party are middle class. The New Party was originally a faction of the KMT and one reason they formed this “new party” was that

they thought the KMT had strayed from its roots. The popular saying very clearly shows class, ethnicity, and social identity overlapping in Taiwan's case. This overlap often hinders people from seeing class distinction in front of ethnic difference.

Tiange said,

Mainlanders are more *siwen*. Therefore, they think it is improper to chew betel nut. In addition, they go to "public" places more often. We (native Taiwanese) always work the whole day and we stay at home or hang out at friends or neighbors' houses after work. We do not usually go to public places. Mainlanders are different. They all wear leather shoes, Western suits, and ties when they go out. Therefore, they do not chew betel nut. Betel nut chewing and Western suits do not match...

Tiange points out the class distinction that overlaps with ethnicity and access to the public sphere. As mentioned in Chapter 4, *siwen* is the local cultural glossing of "class." When describing someone as *siwen*, it contains class implications. Moreover, in Taiwan, "western suits and leather shoes" are also class markers. This is quite different from the situation of mainland China where most men walking on the street wear "western style suits and leather shoes." Farmers often wear such (very dusty) western style suits as they carry products to the market and perhaps (when it is cold) to work in the fields. In daily life practice in Taiwan, however, the dressing style for the working class is jeans or shorts, a T-shirt, and flip-flops or sports shoes. In addition to class distinction, Tiange also tell us that native Taiwanese go home or to neighbors' houses after work to hang out, in contrast with mainlanders who go to public places. This comment indicates the existence of an uneven social structure between the two groups in relation to space. Once again, this is a statement that superficially shows an ethnic difference, but where the hidden defining element is class.

As I said, there is a betel nut chewing tradition in mainland China, but it is insignificant among Han Chinese. Yet, it is more or less certain that there were a few

mainlanders who chewed betel nut before they came to Taiwan. Nevertheless, my informants' intention was to claim that betel nut chewing is not traditional for mainlanders. Leaving aside the value judgment on it, chewing betel nut is one of the marks that is said to distinguish native Taiwanese from mainlanders. Most important of all, it shows how different class positions play a role in relation to betel nut consumption.

Furthermore, as mentioned in the *taike* section, the intention to exclude betel nut chewing in constructing *taike* as a new Taiwanese identity is a result of the class implications of betel nut consumption. Why some people try to exclude betel nut chewing from this new identity is not because they disagree that betel nut is a symbol of locality. Instead, what they actually try to exclude is its class references which might be incorporated into this new way to identify as Taiwanese.

In contemporary Taiwan, one of the most important social identities is based on native Taiwanese identity. In the course of the construction of ethnic identity, drawing a boundary is a crucial step. In this boundary making process in Taiwan, the important thing has been to exclude mainlanders and the "mainland China and Chinese" that they represent. By excluding mainlanders from descriptions of betel nut chewing, they not only address their different positions in class and social structure, but also use it as a way to distinguish themselves ethnically from the others. Thus, the contradiction between the two statements—the cancer of Taiwan and the symbol of locality—reflects these two ongoing discourses and therefore the two different social identities that are based on them. That is to say, the two statements are the products of two different social identities (Taiwanese identity and Chinese identity). These two social identities are further supported by two different ideas of nationalism in Taiwan.

They are not paradoxical if we examine them in the context of social identity and nationalism in Taiwan. I will expand on these ideas further in the conclusion.

Aborigines vs. Native Taiwanese

The Origin Myth of Betel Nut: the Aborigines

Many Taiwanese believe that betel nut exists and is popular in Taiwan because of the influence of the Aborigines rather than the domination of Han Chinese culture in Taiwan. Many informants told me that the origin of betel nut usage was with the Aborigines. In Taiwan, while Aborigines and native Taiwanese have some similarities in their cultural and social meanings for betel nut usage, there are also some significant differences.

The archeological evidence shows that Taiwan Aborigines used betel nut as early as the Neolithic Age (Jiang 2000). Differences in functions for betel nut can also be found among aborigine groups. Not only the Aborigines in Taiwan but also other Malay-Polynesian groups have this habit. Betel nut chewing as far as the Aborigines in Taiwan go, should be seen in the context of a larger Austronesian speaking culture. Within this context, each different ethnic group also has their own contexts for using betel nut. For example, Paiwan use betel nut in their weddings as a symbol of love. Puyuma use betel nut for witchcraft and spells. The Tsou, Bunun, and Atayal tribes in the north of Nantou did not used to have a betel nut chewing habit (Wang 1999:182) although almost all tribes have a significantly high chewing rate now.

Some people claim that Han Chinese learned betel nut chewing from the Aborigines as a way to adjust to Taiwan's weather and living environments when they first migrated to Taiwan. Many people believe that when those Han Chinese moved to Taiwan and made contact with the local people, especially plains aborigines to whom

chewing betel nut was important, they then learned the practice. This belief is quite common among Taiwanese in the present.

Meanwhile, however, some historians disagree that Han Chinese learned betel nut chewing after they arrived in Taiwan. Lin (2003) thinks that Han Chinese should have known about betel nut chewing much earlier since there is evidence of betel nut chewing in Fujian and Guangdong, especially the latter one, and these were the provinces where most of the migrants who migrated to Taiwan were originally from. Here, however, I also must clarify that even though there are records on Han Chinese chewing betel nut in mainland China, it was not a “popular” practice, especially in Fujian where the majority of Han Taiwanese originally came from.

Therefore, the question arises: When did those migrants learn betel nut chewing? Did they chew it before they went to Taiwan? Did they learn it from the Aborigines after they migrated to Taiwan? Which group is the origin for the existing betel nut usage on Taiwan Island? Unfortunately, there are no positive answers. It is possible that those migrants knew betel nut chewing while they were still on the mainland. It is also possible that the migrants, in order to resist tropical diseases and the coldness of winters on Taiwan, learned betel nut chewing from the Aborigines after they arrived. It is possible that they did not know betel nut chewing while they were on the mainland or that they knew betel nut chewing, but did not have the habit before migrating. There are many possibilities and we do not have enough evidence to prove any of them.

In this sense, my statement that people’s belief that the Aborigines are the origin of betel nut chewing in Taiwan is a myth is not meant to exclude the possibility that it might be true. In fact, considering that other Fujianese migrants in the world such as those in Southeast Asia do not have a betel nut chewing practice does enhance

the possibility that Han Taiwanese chewing betel nut might come from the Aboriginal influence, instead of from their Fujian origin. Nevertheless, there is one thing that is certain: Han Chinese, minorities in mainland China, and the Aborigines chewed betel nut in different social and cultural contexts and they have different popularity. People in Taiwan have begun to stress this Aborigine origin for particular reasons that have everything to do with the present and little to do with what actually did or did not occur in the past. In this sense, it is analytically important to see the Aborigines as the origin of betel nut chewing in Taiwan as a myth in order to unpack why Taiwanese believe so. The symbolic meanings of this belief, in the end, are more essential to approaching social identity in Taiwan than the reality.

Not only native Taiwanese, but also the Aborigines themselves have this belief. I knew an aborigine during fieldwork who told me that “we” (the Aborigines) are the origins of betel nut usage. Betel nut chewing is “our” influence on Taiwanese culture, he said. On the contrary, Lin (2003) claimed it is wrong to attribute betel nut chewing of native Taiwanese to the Aborigines. Lin says his intention behind writing a betel nut article was to argue against the information that appears on the Health Bureau’s website. On the website, it describes how native Taiwanese learned betel nut chewing from the Aborigines. Lin thinks this is evidence to show that Han people intended to attribute negative cultural elements to the Aborigines.

Lin’s comment is true if we examine this attribution under the long existing stigma and stereotypes of the Aborigines in Taiwan. For a long time things about the aborigines have been portrayed negatively in Taiwan. This is because native Taiwanese (and mainlanders too) think the Aborigines are less “evolved.” This ideology is based on typical Han chauvinism—Han are the center and Han people

have the responsibility to civilize such “barbarians.” Native Taiwanese have readily discriminated against the Aborigines, both in the past and now.

However, while Lin’s words are true to a certain degree, there is also something other than deliberate discrimination against the Aborigines here. When my aborigine informant claimed it to be their influence, his intention was to show how the Aborigines also have the power to influence Han culture.

Betel nut chewing is seen negatively by a majority of people and this is why Lin takes it as evidence of discrimination against Aborigines. Why do Taiwanese claim the origin of betel nut is the Aborigines despite Han people in general looking down on them as “primitive”? Is it just because people want to blame embarrassing practices on a marginal group? If they truly believe it is an embarrassment and totally lacks any positive value, why would they ever adopt this habit? How can we explain this myth? In order to continue to unpack this origin myth, it is important to also bring into the myth solving process the other myth about Aborigines that I found from fieldwork.

From *Chhi-a* to *Pau-hiu-a*

Around 1995, after the Taiwan government and scholars started their campaigns about betel nut causing cancer in popular media, people in southern Taiwan suddenly all refused to chew *chhi-a*, and instead they all changed to *pau-hiu-a*. My informants’ quick answer for this sudden transformation was that *pau-hiu-a* is the Aborigines’ way of chewing and their way does not cause cancer. People get cancer because they chew *chhi-a*. This change has been quite thorough as well. None of my informants chew *chhi-a* now. It is even quite hard to buy *chhi-a* in southern Taiwan. During fieldwork, I drove around Kaohsiung City to try to buy *chhi-a*. I randomly

asked at four of the shops, but none of them sold it. The Garden still sells *chhi-a*, but Thau-ke-niu only makes two packages each time and, according to my observation, those two packages were often consumed by Thau-ke just before they went bad. However, before 1995, most betel nut users chewed *chhi-a*, except for the Aborigines who chewed *pau-hiu-a*.

Although none of my informants' first betel nut was *pau-hiu-a*, they now all chew *pau-hiu-a*. A-Yu said,

I changed to *pau-hiu-a* because my father changed to it. My uncle still chewed *chhi-a* at that time. He later changed to *pau-hiu-a* also. I think he changed because *chhi-a* is bad for your mouth.

Another informant told me,

There were few people who chewed *pau-hiu-a* before about ten years ago. No one chewed it. Everyone chewed *chhi-a*. However, later on, when the TV news reported that *chhi-a* increased the probability of cancer, then people changed to *pau-hiu-a*.

Thau-ke-niu told me when she was still a student helping her mother selling betel nut, she remembered no one chewing *pau-hui-a*. She said, "everyone chewed *chhi-a*." Yet, almost all of her customers chew *pau-hiu-a* now. The above then is the quick answer for this transformation, but looking at what is wrong with *chhi-a* gives us access to others.

According to my informants the first thing "wrong" with *chhi-a* is that the pepper betel flower that is sandwiched inside it causes cancer. *Chhi-a* is an unripe betel nut sliced down the middle to give two halves but keeping the bottom part connected. A piece of betel pepper flower is then sandwiched inside. *Pau-hui-a* on the other hand, is an unripe⁶³ or mature betel nut that is wrapped in a betel leaf. In other

⁶³ Different from other betel nut chewing places, such as India, Africa, and the Pacific Islands, Taiwanese prefer unripe betel nuts. The major difference between unripe betel nuts and the matured ones is the former ones contain more water and less fiber. A very young betel nut can contain no fiber

words, there is no betel pepper flower in *pau-hiu-a*. The flower of betel pepper contains a natural element named *safrole* and scientific research has shown that *safrole* causes cancer. The news about *safrole* causing cancer was widely reported on TV around 1995. According to Han (2000), one betel quid with approximately 0.3 g of betel flower contains 5000ppm *safrole* while the regulation by the Health Bureau is no more than 1ppm in a one-liter drink.⁶⁴ Shuige told me that people used to chew *chhi-a* a lot, but then they changed because the government kept saying *safrole* causes cancer.

The second thing “wrong” with *chhi-a* was the red lime that is used in *chhi-a*. People believe that red lime is more poisonous than white lime. As mentioned, lime (calcium hydroxide) is a necessary element for chewing betel nut. In Taiwan, there are two types of lime, one is “*honghui*” (red lime, 紅灰) and the other is “*baihui*” (white lime, 白灰). Red lime is for *chhi-a* and white lime is for *pau-hiu-a* (occasionally people use red lime for *pau-hiu-a* also but this is quite uncommon). Red lime is unique to Taiwan. All other betel nut consuming areas use white lime although the form of the white lime differs. For example, Gupta describes, how “in Papua New Guinea lime is available in a powdered form” (2002:79), but in Taiwan both limes are in paste form.

Both limes used for betel nut chewing come from “cooked lime (*shou shihui*, 熟石灰).” In Taiwan, people separate lime into two large categories: “raw lime (*shen shihui*, 生石灰)” and cooked lime. Raw lime is obtained from heating limestone directly and raw lime is generally used for construction. Cooked lime is the raw lime

at all. Another difference between Taiwan and the other places is that Taiwanese prefer fresh betel nut. Processed betel nut only existed in the past when production was not enough to meet consumption demands year round. In other places, people often consume processed betel nut.

⁶⁴ *Safrole* is a kind of natural element. It exists in *Sassafras*, betel flower, and *Ocimum basilicum* (basil). *Safrole* is often added into perfumes, cosmetic products, and food ingredients. For example, there is *safrole* in coke.

after it has been washed by water many times. The cooked lime is also known as slaked lime. The purpose of washing lime by water is to wash some of the alkali out of the lime. Betel nut is acidic so it is better to combine it with lime to chew because the two neutralize each other. If the cooked lime is not properly washed, however, and too much alkali remains, it may burn people's mouths while they chew. If there is too little alkali left, then the effect of betel nut chewing is too weak. White lime consists only of cooked lime (slaked lime). The main ingredients of red lime, beyond slaked lime, are *Acacia Catechu* extracted from Chinese medicine, aromatic condiments, and sometimes sorghum liquor. The specific ingredients are often secret from lime producer to producer.

The taste of *chhi-a* (mainly because of the red lime in it) is sweeter and less spicy and therefore people often see *chhi-a* as more suitable for beginners. As I just described though, there are many more additional ingredients in red lime than white lime. Therefore, my informants told me the reason why *chhi-a* is less healthy is because the red lime is not "natural," at least not as "natural" as white lime. They think the making of red lime adds too many artificial elements. My informants claimed that those "additional, artificial, and chemical" ingredients are not "natural" and they are the cause of oral cancer. For example, A-Xiu said, "The red lime is too artificial. It is not natural. People add chemical ingredients in order to make it."

The third thing "wrong" with *chhi-a* is related to the process by which it is made. As I described, one must to cut unripe betel nuts into halves to make it. Betel nut, similar with apples, oxidizes easily. Once a betel nut is cut, it thus does not take a long time before the surface of the nut turns to a brown or even black color—the typical result of oxidization. However, people think that once a betel nut is oxidized its "selling face," or *maixiang* (賣相) becomes unfavorable to customers. In order to

keep it white, betel nut sellers put a bit of powdered bleach on it during the washing process. That is to say, they soak the nuts in bleach for a while and then use water to wash them off. Yet if the shopkeepers do not wash the betel nut with water for long enough, it is possible that a large amount of bleach still remains on the betel nut. In fact, no matter how long the shopkeepers wash the betel nut, some of the bleach has already gone into the nut or it would not work to keep the nut whitening in the first place. A-Xiu told me, "Betel nut shop sellers put bleach in to wash *chhi-a* and as we all know, bleach is toxic. It is wrong to do so." Another male informant describing how toxic *chhi-a* is, said,

Chhi-a would turn black if it is left there for too long. This is why the sellers have to add bleach. People say that the reason betel nut cause oral cancer is all because of this bleaching process. That kind of betel nut is completely inedible. Bleach itself is toxic. Bleach can resist SARS. During the SARS crisis, the government told us to use bleach to wash every thing. In order to have a better selling face for betel nut [*chhi-a*], they all have to be bleached. Ours (meaning *pau-hiu-a*) is different. The white lime is also used for making tofu in order to make it solidify.

First, his words show how toxic the bleach is and therefore why *chhi-a* is bad for people's mouths. He then mentions that the white lime used for *pau-hiu-a* is the same as that used for making tofu and therefore it should not hurt the human body. Tofu is a common food in Taiwan and people generally see tofu as a healthy food. Therefore, by pulling tofu and white lime together, he implies that, just as tofu is healthy, white lime will not hurt people's bodies.

Many informants thus told me *chhi-a* causes cancer whether they attributed the cancer to *safrole* in betel flower, "unnatural ingredients" in red lime, bleach used for preventing betel nut oxidization, or all of the above. This idea though is reinforced when it is contrasted with how the Aborigines chew betel nut. One informant said,

I changed to chew *pau-hui-a* instead of *chhi-a* because the latter one causes oral cancer. You know, aboriginals all chewed *pau-hiu-a*, and they chewed it

for several thousands of years. You do not hear that they got oral cancer in the past... *chhi-a* causes cancer because it is not natural.

Pau-hiu-a indeed is the Aborigine way of chewing betel nut and, in fact, this way of chewing is very similar to that of people in Southeast Asia. Many informants told me a similar story: that betel nut chewing is the tradition of aboriginals in Taiwan, they did it for several thousands of years, and according to my informants, “you never heard in the past that Aborigines died because of oral cancer.” Based on those factors, many Taiwanese believe they should chew *pau-hiu-a* in order to avoid cancer. It is more “natural” and it is a “traditional” way of chewing, therefore it is supposedly harmless.

The idea of returning to tradition and nature is important because it also incorporates the concept of Taiwanization. When I asked Chejie what she thinks of the term “Taiwanization” (*bentuhua*), she said,

Taiwanization should be returning to nature. Therefore, you speak your Holo and I speak my Hakka, or Mandarin or whatever my hometown language is. As for lifestyle, it is to return to the origins (*bentu*). Like eating what you ate while you were a kid. Taiwanization means to return to nature. I speak my own language, Holo, is a return to nature.

Her statement links Taiwanization with emphasizing local tradition and a “natural” condition. Most important of all, her words address the idea of returning to something that is seen as “original.” Therefore, to her, it is “natural” for Holo people to speak Holo and Hakka people to speak Hakka. This statement is very interesting because speaking local languages has been one of the first steps in the construction of Taiwanese identity. This was a result of the KMT creation of a hierarchy of superiority between different languages—that Mandarin is a beautiful and well-developed language and the others are vulgar, less-developed “local” dialects.

In addition, based on biomedical research, the alkali of lime damages the skin of people's mouths and creates an increased probability that regular cells will become cancerous (Chen and Han 1998: 49). Therefore, the belief that white lime is harmless is problematic. Bleach indeed is toxic, but medical researchers believe that even without bleach, betel nut chewing still causes oral cancer because the areca nut (betel nut) itself causes cancer. My intention here is to show that these beliefs are actually more like "urban legends" than true statements. The important part is that they provide justification for why people believe that the Aborigines' way of chewing is the right and "natural" way to consume betel nut. They believe that as soon as they adopt the Aborigines' way, they will not face the threat of cancer. At the same time, this is also a way to return to Taiwan's "roots"—the Aborigines.

Unpacking the Aborigines Origin Myth

Authenticity and Legitimacy

Thus *chhi-a* to *pau-hiu-a* myth should be located as a part of the origin myth of betel nut—that the Aborigines are the origin of betel nut chewing among Taiwanese. Betel nut users claim their change in chewing method resulted from the aborigines way of chewing being the original one and therefore harmless. To my informants, their intention is to return to an authentic cultural practice (*pau-hiu-a*), instead of following a newly invented native Taiwanese (Han) way (*chhi-a*).

This authenticity is crucial in constructing native Taiwanese social identity. It is true that native Taiwanese have been used to looking down on the Aborigines. Native Taiwanese, as most Han did, thought of the Aborigines as "barbarians" who were less civilized. The native Taiwanese had a great number of conflicts with the Aborigines ever since they migrated to Taiwan for various reasons such as racism and

competition over economic resources. However, after the lifting of martial law in 1987, there was a rise of open identity politics (for all ethnic identities and all other different identifies such as gender and class) which emerged along with democracy and a specifically “Taiwanese” identity.

During this period of identity politics, the Aborigines started to claim their own right to name themselves. They asked to be named Taiwan *yuanzhumin* meaning “original inhabitants”. They refused to be named “*shanbao*” (mountain people 山胞) or “*hoan-a*” (barbarian 番仔)—the first one is in Mandarin and the second one is in Holo. These both were common but discriminatory terms used by Han Taiwanese. This renaming movement, in addition to de-stigmatizing the Aborigines, revealed a larger recognition that the Aborigines were the *original* people of Taiwan.

As a result, being an Aborigine, to a certain degree, has become being the most “authentic” Taiwanese and qualifies one as even more “authentic” than native Taiwanese. As my informant said, “the Aborigines are real Taiwanese therefore there is no issue of Taiwanization for them.” This is the same reason my informants claimed that the aboriginal way of chewing betel nut is the authentic one. In other words, the Aborigines are authentic Taiwanese, and all other people, including native Taiwanese are not as authentic as them for being “Taiwanese.”

This claim provokes a big disjuncture in previous national ideology in terms of defining who people are. According to the previously dominant KMT version of identity, everyone in Taiwan (including the Aborigines) is Chinese. However, the rise of native Taiwanese identity has pushed to resist the KMT ideology to argue that Taiwanese are not Chinese. Therefore, proponents of this new identity aim to distinguish themselves from the KMT “Chinese” version. One important element thus has been to emphasize Aboriginal roots since Aboriginal roots is something that

Taiwan shares with Southeast Asian countries as well as the Pacific islands but not with Chinese on mainland China. Chinese on mainland China are not a part of this Austronesian speaking people. The “re-discovery” of plains aborigines in Taiwanese society today is also a part of this new trend.

The recognition of Aborigine identity and the rise of native Taiwanese identity overlapped significantly. The link with the Aborigines also has been used to provide “blood” evidence to distinguish Taiwanese from Chinese. This is because when Han Chinese from Fujian and Guangdong migrated to Taiwan, many of whom were men, they often inter-married with local women who were mainly plains Aborigines. The descendants of these intermarriages are the ancestors of many native Taiwanese. This thus can make native Taiwanese “racially” different from Chinese on mainland China based on this ideology and a willingness to make an exception to the usual idea of patrilineal descent. This is in addition to the historical and cultural differences which have occurred as the two places belonged to different governments for more than 100 years.

Although ever since Han Chinese migrated to Taiwan, there have been conflicts between them and the Aborigines, the Aborigine roots have now become the key to native Taiwanese identity. Aborigines therefore represent “authentic Taiwanese” and this authenticity legitimates Taiwanese’s claims to being distinct from “Chinese.” When Paul Festa (2006) analyzes flower drinking among Taiwanese men, he also points out, “The search for an aboriginal essence has become part of Taiwan’s new ideological regime of authenticity.” In other words, the rise of identity politics for various ethnic groups in Taiwan leads two “contradictory” results. The first one is the rise of the Aboriginal identity which, using their strategic alliances with mainlanders, is based on resisting native Taiwanese domination. Meanwhile, the

rise of native Taiwanese identity has been accomplished through claiming a blood relationship with the Aborigines (authentic Taiwanese) to gain authenticity for themselves to resist Chinese mainlanders and KMT ideology.

Prasenjit Duara (1998) says, “all nations and societies that see themselves as subjects progressing or evolving through linear time need to constitute an ‘unchanging core’ in order to recognize themselves in their ever-changing circumstances” (1998:291). Despite the aboriginal way of using betel nut having also changed through time (not all of them even had betel nut chewing habits in the past), the “aboriginal way” is seen as something unchanged by Taiwanese. The origin myth, as well as the transformation from *chhi-a* to *pau-hiu-a* is thus a return to authentic “Taiwanese” cultural practice. It reflects a desire to return to an imagined more “natural” condition and is an integral part of current identity politics.

Lin’s critique of the Health Bureau’s intention to “blame” negative cultural elements on the Aborigines ignores the other side of the story. In native Taiwanese identity, it is important to link themselves with the “authentic Taiwanese” rather than with Chinese on mainland China. In this sense, the origin myth of betel nut reflects a parallel construction of native Taiwanese identity. Although it is a myth about the Aborigines, it has resulted from the rise of Taiwanese social identity. The origin myth actually reflects the core values of Taiwanese social identity as seeking authenticity and therefore legitimacy.

However, when I describe how important it is for Taiwanese identity to make use of the Aborigines, this does not imply there is no discrimination toward them in contemporary Taiwanese society. The prejudice still exists at the level of daily life. Aborigines still have a much higher unemployment rate than Han and they are much poorer on average. Non-aborigines often explain this as because the Aborigines are

alcoholics or lazy people—the typical justification made toward indigenous peoples by majority groups in many places in the world. Non-aborigines, at a practical level, still look down the Aborigines. It is then only on a symbolic level that the authenticity of the Aborigines is desired. This does mean that on a substantial level, the Aborigines constitute a fundamental base for constructing Taiwanese identity; instead, it is clearly native Taiwanese who form this base. Nevertheless, from the Aborigines perspective, even this symbolic importance has at least been a way for them to get more negotiating power in relation to ethnic relation and politics in Taiwan.

Local Knowledge

Moreover, it is important to situate this betel nut origin myth in the context of the tremendous fight waged against betel nut in the public domain under the biomedical discourse. As the power of the biomedical discourse is based on it taking the form of being “scientific,” betel nut users have little power to argue against it since they lack scientific knowledge. When the government began to campaign for the correlation between oral cancer and betel nut chewing, betel nut consumers needed a solution. Under such constraints, they had only two solutions. One was to quit, which was the goal of the campaigns, and the other was to seek an alternative way of chewing which they would justify as not hurting the human body. If the consumers did not want to quit, they almost exclusively had to follow this second option.

As a result, betel nut users sought their alternative solution through local knowledge. As my informant said, “the aborigines have chewed it for several thousands of years and you never heard about them having cancer before.” To my informants, one important correlation between consuming betel nut and oral cancer is that cancer is situated in modern change. *Chhi-a* is a modern Han Taiwanese form of

chewing betel nut (therefore it causes cancer), as long as people return to a traditional and natural way, then their health would not be threatened by cancer. To them, cancer is a by-product of a modern life style.

From native Taiwanese perspective, the Aborigines had chewed betel nut and yet had not died from cancer (although there is no evidence to tell us whether or not this statement is true). Betel nut users, in order to resist the biomedical discourse and the scientific knowledge that it represents, seek their alternative solution through local knowledge. The “local” here refers not to native Taiwanese culture, but instead to Aborigine cultures. Where mainstream discourse sees betel nut chewing as “backward,” chewers can pull on current discourses of identity and “origins” to frame exactly the modern elements of chewing as these which cause cancer. This shows how the agency of betel nut users comes through seeking counter-discourses and in using the desire to seek something “original,” “authentic,” and therefore “harmless.”

Ethnic Identity as an Ideology

Whether a majority of Taiwanese like it or not, betel nut consumption, to a large extent, is a symbol of native Taiwan. I have shown how the link between betel nut and native Taiwanese, in contrast with mainlanders, plays an important role to construct betel nut as a symbol of locality. Furthermore, through unpacking the origin myth of betel nut chewing, I have pointed to how the desire of seeking authenticity plays an important role both in identity politics in Taiwan and in cross-straits politics.

In Taiwan, the process for constructing social identity is deeply intertwined with ethnicity. In this sense, ethnicity is used as a justification for betel nut consumption. By this logic, the reasons native Taiwanese chew betel nut and mainlanders do not both can be because of ethnicity. The “danger” of this ethnic

reference is, however, that it hides the class inequalities between these ethnic groups. As Tiange said, mainlanders are more *siwen* and therefore they do not chew betel nut. This statement downplays the importance of class and instead, it allows the focus to stay on ethnicity.

The ongoing debate over *taike* as a new social identity is directly related to social identity. It is a part of constructing Taiwanese identity in opposed to “Chinese identity.” However, in this new cultural movement, people try to exclude betel nut chewing. For them, by excluding betel nut consumption, this new identity gains legitimacy from people in the middle and upper classes. That is to say, although it is an embrace of a more “vulgar” culture, this does not imply embracing a “working class” culture. Embracing this new *taike* identity therefore does not need to directly challenge the socio-economic inequalities or existing power relationships in society. It leads the construction social identity into the realm of ethnic identity, meaning that as long as individuals willingly *subjectively* identify themselves as Taiwanese/*taike*, then they are. This undermines efforts to make the social-economic structure and inequality between betel nut consumers and non-users transparent in favor of an ethnic ideology which can galvanize a wider spectrum of political support for the DPP.

When betel nut consumption is represented in the form of ethnic difference, it justifies class distinctions along ethnic lines. From the perspective of maintaining state power, no matter which party is in power, this is not necessarily a bad thing as long as it can prevent people from seeing social inequality in Taiwanese society. By using ethnic references, the challenge to the existing social-economic structure in Taiwan can be avoided. Using ethnic ideology instead of focusing on class distinctions not only prevents people from seeing their inferior social-economic position, but also provides the foundation for a specific kind of nationalism in Taiwan.

In the next chapter, I will go deeper into the role of the nation state and nationalism in these discourses of betel nut consumption. I will only grasp some crucial aspects of ethnic relations and social identity in Taiwan.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Is It Traditional?

In the beginning of Chapter 1, I described how A-Fang-mei, as well as many Taiwanese, did not understand why there were so many Taiwanese involved in this “traditional” betel nut chewing custom. In Chapter 2, I introduced how mainstream discourses see betel nut chewing as a “cultural survival”—something which has remained unchanged in spite of an evolutionary process. In Chapter 3, I described how my informants see betel nut chewing as a “traditional” habit for men, but not for women. I described how my informants see betel nut as a “traditional” practice based on locality, therefore making it a symbol of “grassroots and native” Taiwan. Despite the above statements that, from various angles, all intend to claim betel nut chewing as traditional, can we really say that betel nut chewing is “traditional” at present? To what extent is it traditional and to what extent is it modern?

From the betel nut usage history in Taiwan, as introduced in Chapter 1, we know that betel nut was used for medicinal purposes, hosting guests, appeasing conflicts between two arguing sides, and creating solidarity within a group. However, if we examine all these functions in relation to contemporary betel nut consumption, most functions have either disappeared or been transformed. Taiwanese no longer consume betel nut for resisting malaria since the modern medical system has promoted other medicines to fight tropical disease in addition to the fact that malaria disappeared from Taiwan in 1965.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ In 1956, malaria was not in the top ten causes of death in Taiwan. In 1965, the WHO announced that malaria had totally disappeared from Taiwan (*Malaria Eradication in Taiwan* 2005).

Although my informants sometimes claimed certain medicinal effects of chewing betel nut, such as improving digestion, they do not consume betel nut as a substitute for seeking medical treatment. The medicinal effects are more like “extra” advantages for consuming betel nut or ways to justify the practice by pointing out that it does do some good things for the human body. In fact, not only has this positive medicinal function disappeared, but also it has been replaced with the modern medical discourse of cancer, a profoundly negative effect.

To a certain degree, betel nut is still used as something for hosting guests, yet the meaning of it has changed today. In the past, people gave betel nut to host guests because it showed the giver’s hospitality. The nut itself was at times a strongly symbolic material therefore making it a valuable gift for guests. However, this connotation has disappeared in the contemporary context. People still give betel nut, as long as the giver chews it and the visitor happens to chew it as well, in social occasions such as gatherings of friends. However, the result of this betel nut giving is more to maintain relationships or shorten the distance between two sides; it is a material to express friendship instead of one expressing hospitality today.

In this sense, the sociability of betel nut exchange still exists, just like cigarettes. However, as I discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, the strong association of gender and class with betel nut chewing today have shifted how people use the sociability of exchanging betel nut. For example, in the past, the leader of a group might give betel nut to recruit followers and build social solidarity which were important to a frontier society. A parallel situation still existing in contemporary Taiwan is the use of betel nut in local elections. Local politicians prepare betel nut in their offices as a necessity for their “voters.” These examples all show how betel nut

was and still is used for its sociability. This sociability is able to create group solidarity, express friendship, and shorten the distance between people.

Yet, comparing the above two examples, we find the way of manipulating the sociability of betel nut exchange has changed. Today, the reason that politicians give out betel nut and even chew betel nut with voters occurs in the context of the giver “playing down” his social status. The intention is to show that the giver (local politician) is willing to stand on the same side as local people and therefore to be a part of the local. This is because, as I layout in Chapter 4, betel nut chewers are usually working class people today. By playing down the giver’s class, betel nut creates a sense of sameness with these local men. This sameness is important to local politicians as a way to gain support from them. In other words, using betel nut for creating solidarity has changed from an up-to-down to a down-to-up process. It is not for leaders to recruit followers. Instead, it is for the leaders to “join” the followers and thus gain their support.

Betel nut’s use to appease two arguing sides is not as significant today. This has a lot do with the fact that betel nut lost its hospitality connotations and therefore it is too weak to be used to settle conflicts. People need something that carries a higher degree of hospitality and symbolic value in order to show their sincerity. Without the proper amount of sincerity within it, then a symbol is too weak to allow two arguing sides to reconcile. Giving out betel nut is a way to shorten distance today, especially between strangers, and therefore it can still bring two people closer in its contemporary context. Yet, this does not mean that it is powerful enough to appease conflicts. In other words, the effect of exchanging betel nut in relation to social relations is much weaker than it used to be.

Although specialized betel nut shops appeared since the 1980s, the existence of a betel nut market started as early as Qing rule in Taiwan. That is to say, although betel nut was and still is a commodity, it became much more commoditized since the 1970s. In the past, although there were some betel nut sales in the market, most people got their betel nut through their own production or they bought the necessary ingredients that they did not grow themselves (betel nut, betel leaf, and lime) from the market and then processed it by themselves. This method still exists in some aboriginal villages. On the other hand, most betel nut consumers nowadays buy processed betel nut from shops: even if they are themselves betel nut farmers or distributors. In this sense, there is a degree difference in relation to betel nut as a commodity. There was more betel nut exchanging based on reciprocal social exchange in the past yet significantly more monetary exchanging in contemporary Taiwan. I do not mean that there are no reciprocal relations involved in betel nut exchange today. Betel nut in its modern context, however, is much more commoditized and much less a “traditional custom.”

If we examine the types of betel nut that Taiwanese consume today, we find still more problems with claims that it is a tradition. For example, *chhi-a* is a new form for chewing which arose in the 1970s as described in Chapter 5. In the beginning of contemporary betel nut consumption, *chhi-a* was consumed by a majority of consumers. Although the other popular form of betel nut, *pau-hiu-a*, is an older form of chewing prevalent among the Aborigines, native Taiwanese (mainly in southern Taiwan) did not adopt it until mainstream discourse started to emphasize the correlation between betel nut chewing and oral cancer around 1995. More importantly, it was originally the aboriginal way of chewing, not that of Han Taiwanese. The adoption of *pau-hiu-a* is then a modern form for non-aborigines in Taiwan. In other

words, even the way of chewing betel nut is a “new tradition” for non-aboriginal betel nut users in its contemporary commoditized context.

In this sense, it is very hard to claim that betel nut consumption is only a “tradition” since its context, purpose, way of chewing, and the degree of commoditization are all “new” to Taiwanese today. It is a “modern” form of consumption that is situated in the context of industrialization and modernization in Taiwan. Betel nut consumption is not “traditional” at all. It is a modern activity which people purposefully claim as “tradition.”

The Rise of Betel Nut Consumption in Taiwan

Political Economic Aspects

Nevertheless, why did betel nut consumption get popular since the seventies despite Taiwanese claims that it is a “tradition”? In order to understand this, it is important to understand how its contemporary consumption was popularized in Taiwan’s context and how it became a modern consumption habit. It is important to take into account both economy and culture to explain fully the rise of betel nut consumption in Taiwan’s case. The key is to identify how economy and culture affect human behavior (or more precisely, substance use behavior) and how these effects influence the economy and culture in return. The relationship between economy, culture, and human behavior is dynamic and dialectical. We thus further need to examine this relationship in both its local as well as global contexts.

The force to start betel nut consumption in the 1970s was largely Taiwan’s economic transformation. In fact, Pan Meiling (2001) thinks betel nut consumption is popular in Taiwan because of the industrialization since the seventies. The industrialization created many job opportunities for long distance truck drivers and

construction workers—they were both primary betel nut consumers in the beginning when betel nut first got popular again. However, I do not intend to claim that consuming betel nut in Taiwan had no previous cultural meanings. In the case of sugar consumption, there was a clear correlation between industrialization and per capita sugar consumption, but there is no such direct quantitative link for betel nut. Therefore it is important to point out that when I describe a political economic factor, I am not separating it from its cultural meaning. In the Taiwan betel nut case, they are not separable.

The rise of betel nut consumption occurred in the context of a need for energizing substances in capitalist industrialization in order to allow workers to work longer and harder. In the case of Taiwan, manual workers consume betel nut for its energizing effects. Pan (2001) says that compared with smoking cigarettes, betel nut chewing is a “better” substance for manual workers (better for maintaining productivity) because they do not need to use their hands to chew betel nut. This means manual workers can work and use the substance at the same time without “wasting” time by stopping what they were doing with their hands.

Working class men consuming substances for energy and therefore for increasing productivity is not unique to Taiwan at all. Qat usage in Yeman (Cassinelli 1986), ganja in Jamaica (Rubin and Comitas 1975), coca in Barasana (Hugh-Jones 1995), and kola in West Africa (Lovejoy 1995) are all examples of drugs that are used to enhance labor intensity. As Daniel Bradburd and William Jankowiak point out, “drugs were a common feature of European expansion because their characteristics made them a particularly effective means of propagating trade or increasing the extent and intensity of labor” (2003:3). This statement identifies two key characteristics of “drugs” and the popularization of them. One is that the nature of a drug makes it a

good trading object and the other is in relation to the effect (both physical and psychological) of increasing the human body's productivity.

As a matter of fact, the need for energizing not only applies to the working class, but also to middle class people and college students. When Josephine Ho criticizes the Taiwan government's intention to crack down on betel nut consumption, she points out that the Taiwanese middle class does the same thing. They have just learned to drink coffee for energizing instead. In this sense, the consumption of energizing substances, to a large degree, is a result of capitalism. Under capitalist ideology, whether someone is a factory worker or a member of the middle class, the essence of capitalism, to work longer and therefore to increase productivity, has already built the foundation for consuming energizing substances.

Furthermore, an economic transformation beginning the popularization of a substance usage is also not unique to Taiwan. David Courtwright (2001) researched how different drugs (alcohol, tobacco, caffeine, opium, marijuana, and cocaine) were popularized worldwide. Many of these drugs including tobacco (from native Americans) and caffeine (from Ethiopia) were all originally exotic substances, from a European perspective, consumed in far-flung exotic cultures. Some of them have become popular worldwide such as coffee, but others of them like betel nut have never really spread on the world level. Among the popular drugs in the world, some of them are largely illegal such as marijuana and others, such as tobacco and caffeine are legal.

Courtwright shows that the first step for a drug (when it is a "foreign" substance) to be popularized worldwide was being accepted by Westerners. In the case of coffee and other caffeine products such as chocolate, Courtwright describes how, after the 17th century, coffee shops became an important place for Frenchmen to

chat, hangout, and do business while drinking coffee or chocolate. However, a substantial popularization of consuming caffeine in the west occurred after the 18th century when Europeans started to systematically plant coffee and coco on their colonial lands. In other words, the economy that is supported by this political power (colonialism) is the pushing force for the popularization of the above substances.

This process of popularizing a “foreign” substance in one culture that Courtwright describe is similar to the story of sugar. Sidney Mintz (1985) shows how sugar was originally an upper class luxury product in Britain. It was then popularized because it provided necessary energy for working class men. In addition, the British expansion of sugar plantations on their colonial land and production through slavery both supported the popularization (or impetus for the popularization) of sugar. In other words, the popularization of many substances (whether they are “drugs” or things like sugar) is directly related to economic and political (especially colonial) transformations in specific historical moments.

In addition, when we examine the popularization of one substance, it is also important to take into account of the infrastructure of that place. For example, one important factor that “helped,” or at least “supported,” the popularity of betel nut in Taiwan is the convenient island-wide transporting infrastructure. As I described in Chapter 1, the harvest time for betel nut varies depending on different geographic locations and weather. Different planting areas “respond” to provide betel nut at different times year round in Taiwan. Therefore, fast, stable, and a well-built island-wide transportation system is essential for distributing betel nut within a short time, especially as Taiwanese consume “fresh” nut. It is particularly important in Taiwan’s case since Taiwanese in general do not like “imported” betel nut—they are too dry and have too much fiber. Smuggled betel nut, mainly from Thailand and China, only

has a chance to enter the Taiwanese betel nut market during May and June when Taiwanese betel nut price is excessively high. In Taiwan, from the time a betel nut is cut in Pingdong to the time a consumer buys it in Taipei can take less than two days.

The importance of transport system to popularize a substance was even more essential to the usage of Qat in northeast Africa. Lee Cassanelli (1998) describes how improvements in the transport system helped to popularize Qat consumption. Qat must be consumed fresh and it will only stay fresh for a short time. Cassanelli describes how a better transportation system (especially airplanes and more regional airports) help Qat overcome the time limits to remain fresh.

Cultural Aspects

Political economy by itself, however, cannot explain the rise of betel nut consumption completely. Economic factors might explain, to a certain degree, why betel nut consumption started at a particular point in time, but why then did betel nut consumption continue to become more popular even in the late 1980s and early 1990s when more and more manual labor jobs moved to China? Furthermore, the economy itself also cannot explain the reality that many consumers actually did not consume it only at work despite their claim that they do it for work. As I discussed in Chapter 4, it is better to see the “in the name of work” motivation for chewing betel nut more as an ideology than reality. In addition, why do Taiwanese men, and not women consume betel nut? Why do people claim betel nut chewing is a “tradition” despite it actually being a modern consumption habit and what are the consequences of this? Why do Taiwanese, including in the official ideology, believe betel nut is a native symbol at the same time they think it is an embarrassment for Taiwan as a member in the global village?

This list of questions can keep going on and on because many phenomena in betel nut consumption cannot solely be explained through political economy. These questions should be understood in the context of Taiwanese culture, instead of merely via an economic explanation. Although the beginning of betel nut consumption was largely pushed by economic change, the cultural meanings of betel nut chewing within Taiwanese culture existed in some form from the beginning and to continue to grow and expand. These cultural aspects provide betel nut consumers a way to construct their cultural identity in terms of gender, class, and social identity. Without its cultural meanings, betel nut could not be a culturally familiar realm for Taiwanese seeking meanings as it would not carry those symbolic meanings. In this section then, I will highlight and bring together some of the key cultural elements in betel nut consumption that I have explored in previous chapters.

Masculinity and Power

As I discussed in Chapter 3, people's first time trying betel nut is generally in the context of male group activities. Through this male group wandering, Taiwanese men are able to socialize a culturally proper masculinity and therefore become a "real" man in Han Taiwanese (mainly male) society. One prototype of this "real" man is the imagination of *chhit-tho-lang*, which connotes the concept of social banditry that Hobsbawn (1969) described. In this sense, pursuing masculinity through the idea of *chhit-tho-lang* represents an intention to resist official control as well as to gain power.

Furthermore, the chewing behavior itself violates the national ideology based on middle class (and intellectual) values in Taiwan. That is to say, betel nut chewing behavior itself contains the idea of rebellion. This rebellion could refer to rebelling

against adult rule, rebelling against the mainstream ideology of modernization, and rebelling against the state's intention to control betel nut consumption. Through these resistances, betel nut consumers gain a feeling of power. I want to clarify here that gaining a feeling of power is *not* equal to actually gaining power. The former one is more about a physiological or emotional feeling and recognition among a local community or group. The latter one is in relation to actual empowerment and a change of position in existing power structures.

From a social control perspective, it is not entirely negative to give betel nut users some feelings of power. This reason that betel nut consumers so enthusiastically pursue power results from the fact that they do not have it. They are relatively powerless people in terms of political economy in Taiwanese society. In this sense, obtaining some feelings of power through masculinity prevents a potential challenge that would be directly related to their lack of power and their marginal social position. Meanwhile, it eliminates an awareness of their actual lack of power and therefore decreases a potential threat to larger power relationships, particularly in relation to the economic and political structures of society.

Moreover, when pursuing power through pursuing masculinity is seen as a "tradition," it justifies men's intention to pursue power. Men are "supposed to" pursue masculinity under this ideology. It thus also reinforces the power relationship between men and women in individual households. In addition, when pursuing masculinity is claimed as "traditional" for men, the unequal power relationships between men and women become a historical necessity, instead of a culturally constructed result. "Tradition," in this sense, is something "natural," meaning it is natural for men to do so as well as men are "naturally" masculine. Therefore, Taiwanese men then legitimate their pursuit of masculinity and power through this "traditional reference."

Furthermore, it maintains the existing power relationship since it is seen as a “tradition”— a timeless and static condition that should not change.

In other words, betel nut chewing provides users a feeling of power via being a real man while at the same time it suspends social inequality. Masculinity focuses attention on the household level, where these men do have power, and away from the class level where they are relatively powerless. It is a safe and necessary step in maintaining the existing political and economic structure. I do not mean, however, that since the result of betel nut chewing benefits the government (since it helps to maintain social stability, or reduces the chance of having a more radical social rebellion to challenge state control), officials therefore “encourage” Taiwanese men to chew it. It does not work in this way. What I mean is that the result of seeing betel nut chewing as traditional for men corresponds to and parallels the state’s interest in maintaining its power and control over people. It allows those powerless men to get power over women (through practicing masculinity) and to get a feeling of power over the state (through opposing state ideology) and therefore the state is able to maintain its power over them.

The dynamic relationships between betel nut consumers, masculinity, and power are key to understanding how gender is contested in betel nut consumption and how the cultural meanings of gender are involved in the popularization of betel nut chewing. The desire to be a “real” man in Taiwanese society is one key to understanding the significance of betel nut chewing among Taiwanese men. The masculine connotations of betel nut chewing might not have *started* to popularize betel nut consumption, but it has been an essential part of maintaining and even increasing the popularity of betel nut among Taiwanese men. Betel nut consumers are

able to form their gender identity within a larger cultural production of gender identity in Taiwan through consuming betel nut.

Class and Capitalism

In chapter 4, I described the class inequality between users and non-users. I showed how users explain social difference in the cultural concept of *siwen* instead of as class difference. Betel nut users see *siwen* as individual personality differences between people instead of as class distinction. When betel nut chewing is seen as a tradition for people who are not *siwen* (or more precisely, are manual laborers), to consume, it suspends the class inequality between users and non-users. Class inequality, in the name of tradition, is transformed into a necessary natural result of individual users being *siwen* or not.

Furthermore, betel nut consumption is justified in the name of a Taiwanese work ethic. This work ethic provides the necessary foundation for maintaining the capitalist mode of production. The rise of Taiwan's economy was largely based in the 1970s when Taiwan started its industrialization. At that time there was a slogan, "Every Livingroom is a Factory,"⁶⁶ which was meant to encourage small-scale industrial production based on individual households. A key to this mode of production was an emphasis on the Taiwanese work ethic, both domestically and globally. In other words, this work ethic provided a self-internalized morality which pushed self-exploitation in the name of individual households. In this process, because they are self-exploited, people are able to be absorbed into the capitalist system without focusing on the exploitative relationships between individuals or their marginal positions in society. More precisely speaking, it is the senior male members

⁶⁶ "Jiating ji gongchang" (家庭即工廠).

in the household who are self-exploited and meanwhile it is them who exploit the household's younger and female members (see Gates 1987; Greenhalgh 1994).

Many betel nut consumers claim their consumption is necessary in order to increase productivity for the sake of their individual households. However, when betel nut is framed merely as "tradition," it undermines a realization of the existing social inequality between users and non-users. It occludes the fact that betel nut users need to be self-exploited in order to fit into capitalist production. As a result, to betel nut users, this increasing productivity is not exploitation, instead it is the representation of a good work ethic.

One thing worth mentioning also is that betel nut users are not the poorest people in Taiwan since they need to have a certain economic base in order to consume it. Their intention to increase productivity is thus not only for survival. Instead, it is for pursuing wealth and doing their masculine duty as a breadwinner. In such circumstances, survival needs alone cannot force these men to exploit themselves and their families. The idea of a male betel nut tradition and the tradition of a Chinese/Taiwanese work ethic provides an important cultural level to this. When the morality of working hard which accompanies betel nut consumption is self-internalized by betel nut users, it obscures the social inequality between users and non-users. Therefore, seeing betel nut as a tradition helps to maintain class distinctions on the one hand, while on the other, it prevents users from focusing on their social position in a larger society and therefore helping to maintain capitalist production. As a result, the betel nut chewing work ethic echoes and reinforces the national ideology of promoting industrialization through self-exploitation.

Once again, we can see the paradoxical results of betel nut consumption from a class angle as it relates to betel nut users, elites, and the state, when people claim it

is a “tradition.” To betel nut users, their consumption is the result of tradition—it is traditional for people who are not *siwen*. To betel nut users, the state’s intention to control its consumption is because they think it is a backward tradition. To a certain degree, as mentioned earlier, it gives them a sense of rebellion against social norms. To the state, betel nut consumption is a national embarrassment and therefore needs to be controlled or even be prohibited.

Meanwhile, the work ethic that is accompanied by this “tradition” is also important for Taiwan’s government to maintain its limited position in an international world. This is because Taiwan’s government clearly understands the importance of Taiwan maintaining its economic position globally since, other than the economy, Taiwan has little power in the world. The economy is one of the only places for Taiwan’s government to find and maintain a place for itself in the contemporary international political world (as exemplified in its accession into the WTO, the only international organization of which it is allowed to be a part). Meanwhile, this spot is important domestically as well, because it gives some degree of legitimacy and grounds for creating nationalism domestically. Therefore, betel nut consumption, although being a national embarrassment, both prevents the users from realizing their inferior economic position domestically by diverting their attention to masculinity at the household level and provides a necessary morality to maintain its economic position globally.

Finally, I want to highlight one point. Since the starting of betel nut consumption was closely tied with industrialization and therefore became a representation of blue-collar workers, class is then essential to understanding betel nut consumption in a modern context. As mentioned, the rise of betel nut consumption shows the formation of a working class culture in contemporary Taiwan. This

working class culture is one of the most important factors in continuing the popularization of betel nut chewing despite the fact that betel nut consumers tend not to admit its class implications.

Nationalism and Authenticity

As I described in Chapter 5, betel nut users see betel nut chewing as an ethnic and cultural difference. It is “traditional” for the Aborigines and native Taiwanese to consume it since it is a part of their “ethnic tradition.” At the same time, this ethnic difference constitutes an important foundation for social identity in the context of Taiwan’s identity politics. As a result, when betel nut chewing is seen merely as ethnic tradition, it hides class distinction which, in Taiwan, also follows ethnic lines. Betel nut usage is then a symbol of different social identities based on ethnicity, not a symbol of class identity as betel nut users tend to deny that their consumption is due to class distinctions. However, in reality, class is the key element in betel nut consumption.

From an elite perspective, it is not necessarily a bad thing when users frame their difference with non-users as one of different social identities. It is a particularly useful strategy in a society like Taiwan, where social identity based on ethnicity is so prominent that class just becomes irrelevant as a result. This further provides the legitimacy for people who have political and economic power to focus on mobilizing different social identities, instead having to deal with class inequalities. The idea of betel nut as a symbol of native Taiwan then hinders betel nut users from seeing their marginal position in terms of political and economic inequality. It furthermore gives betel nut users a positive justification for their consumption. Chewing betel nut

becomes a means of displaying their social identity. This social identity particularly refers to a Taiwanese identity in contrast with a Chinese identity.

Since betel nut chewing is seen as a traditional symbol of native and grassroots Taiwan, this social identity is at the core of the two contemporary nationalisms in Taiwan. As mentioned, one is a Chinese nationalism based on KMT ideology and the other is a Taiwanese nationalism based on DPP ideology. Although the Chinese nationalism claims a Chinese identity, it is also essential for them to emphasize this Chinese identity is based on Taiwan, not in China, since they need to gain support from voters in Taiwan. Taiwan and Taiwanese culture, in this nationalism, is an instance, of Chinese culture, and perhaps one of the best “preserved” instances. In this sense, for KMT ideology too, the recognition of local tradition is a way to gain legitimacy for claiming a Chinese identity in Taiwan.

For the DPP’s ideology, it is even more crucial to emphasize anything that is perceived as a local tradition and therefore could be a symbol of grassroots. This is because, in order to construct Taiwanese nationalism, it is essential to differentiate Taiwanese from Chinese on mainland China. That is why one of the immediate consequences of the rise of Taiwanese nationalism has been the enthusiastic reconstruction of Taiwanese history, tradition, and culture. “Taiwan studies,” a formerly insignificant area suddenly gathered intense interest from individuals, scholars, the public, and the nation state. Many popular bookstores in Taiwan now have a whole section titled “Taiwan studies” that is independent from the “China history” section.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ From my own observations, Taiwanese reading preferences for China are concentrated on history and literature rather than on contemporary social issues. I noticed there are many more books on Chinese history (the dynastic period mainly) and on classical Chinese literature than on contemporary China (PRC) in most bookstores. It seems that Taiwanese are less interested in understanding China in its modern context.

Within this trend, one important step for Taiwanese nationalism has been to build its own authenticity. As I analyzed in Chapter 5, the intention behind claiming that betel nut consumption was originally from the Aborigines, was to construct its authentic roots. The idea of authenticity forms a foundation for “Taiwanese culture.” The search for authenticity is especially important for a place like Taiwan since any sense of “Taiwanese culture” was formerly ignored or oppressed. In other words, both the Aborigines and native Taiwanese have become essential characters in the reconstruction of “Taiwanese culture.” Within that, the existence of the Aborigines provides an ideological focus for the imagination of authenticity.

Furthermore, Duara (1998) indicates that seeking authenticity is essential to nationalism because people need a core, something unchanging, in order to face their own rapid cultural change. In this sense, authenticity is essential not only for DPP nationalism, but also for nationalism in general in the context of modernization. When I described several of my informants in Chapter 2, I mentioned that they often insisted that, unlike people in the north of Taiwan, they are more traditional and are more appreciative of social connections with people such as neighbors or even strangers. The result of this “traditional” self-reference, to betel nut chewers, is to keep these marginal people in that unchanging position of a so-called “Taiwanese culture”—meaning despite their being economically and politically marginal people in Taiwanese society, they feel that they are “traditional” and therefore “authentic” Taiwanese.

That is to say, betel nut users see contemporary betel nut chewing as traditional, representing “Taiwanese culture’s” unchanging past. It further allows them to occupy the core of “Taiwanese culture” while preventing them from seeing their marginality in Taiwan. Meanwhile, this authenticity provides non-users a sense

of continuity and this continuity links them back to the past as well as forward to the more modern future. At the same time of course, native Taiwanese betel nut users can conventionally also see themselves as more modern due to a comparison to an even less changing aboriginal “core.” As a result, this continuity creates solidarity which ties people together and therefore creates a sense of community. This community, or “imagined community” as Benedict Anderson (1983) states, constitutes the core of nationalism in Taiwan.

As a result, we can see that both nationalisms, for various reasons, need to link themselves to the idea of appreciating locality and grassroots Taiwan in order to gain power and the legitimacy to rule Taiwan. Meanwhile, this provides a sense of authenticity that is needed to construct nationalism. Therefore, despite betel nut being seen as a national embarrassment, it is very hard for the KMT to truly crack down it without being accused of attempting to eliminate and discriminate against “Taiwanese culture.” Meanwhile, it is even harder for the DPP to do so since the essence of its nationalism is an emphasis on locality as well as “local tradition.”

Once again, we see how betel nut users contest the mainstream discourse in relation to betel nut consumption on the one hand, but parallel it on the other. Betel nut users see their behavior as a consequence of “ethnic tradition.” This consequence justifies their consumption. Meanwhile, it hides the class inequalities between users and non-users while also providing the users a feeling of being an authentic Taiwanese since the habit was “originally” from the Aborigines, *the* “authentic Taiwanese.” To them, the state’s aim to control betel nut chewing results from the state thinking it is a “backward” tradition. However, to the state, although it is the last thing that members of the government want to express in front of the international world, it provides the authenticity that is needed for constructing and maintaining

nationalisms (both needed for the KMT and the DPP versions). Furthermore, it helps to avoid class conflict, since it is framed as a consequence of different “ethnic traditions,” not social inequality.

Combining Political Economy and Culture

Contemporary betel nut consumption in Taiwan is a good example to see how political economy and culture intersect in human behavior. Both economy and culture cannot solely explain the rise of betel nut consumption. They both play important roles in the rise and popularization of betel nut consumption. The culture of a substance usage behavior is important to understand why many people adopt one behavior over another. For example, the European willingness to accept tobacco but not hallucinogens is probably because (though not solely) the latter one violates a value of European culture—Christianity is against the use of substances to transform consciousness (Courtwright 2001). Whether a particular substance is accepted or not has to do with the debates within its culture.

Furthermore, when we try to understand why a government does not like (or does like) a particular substance usage, we still need to consider the social meanings of this behavior. For example, when Vera Rubin and Lambros Comitas (1975) researched the usage of ganja in Jamaica they pointed out that one important reason for the government’s dislike of ganja usage among the working class is that workers often used it *in groups*. It then provided potential chances for workers to form their own groups and might cause “potential danger” to the government.

From an individual users’ perspective, I am not claiming that “he” consumes betel nut only because of his economic position in Taiwanese society, only because of his native Taiwanese (or Aborigine) social identity, or only because “he” is a

masculine man. Few betel nut consumers would agree with this. Instead, I first need to clarify that my explanation is an etic, anthropologist's, socio-cultural level explanation. Individuals all have their specific personal reasons for starting to chew betel nut, yet the behavior itself is still in the context of (native) Taiwanese, male, and manual labor culture. Secondly, I do not intend to claim a one-way causal relationship between the differences in economy and culture which motivated individual consuming behavior as well as betel nut consumption as a whole.

Despite culture and economy both contributing to popularize betel nut consumption, I want to highlight the agency of betel nut consumers in here as well. From this thesis's ethnographic data, we can see how individual agency is practiced in reframing betel nut consumption. For example, chewers' framing of betel nut consumption as a matter of individual choice and different cleaning habits, as described in Chapter 4, is one way they rebel against mainstream discourse. Furthermore, their intention to gain masculinity and therefore to obtain power is also a method of resisting their lack of power due to their structural position. In addition, betel nut consumers see their behavior as a way to successfully accomplish their family responsibility. By working harder and longer, they can be the breadwinners for their household. Moreover, betel nut consumers use social identity based on ethnicity to subvert the stigmatized class implications of betel nut consumption. In other words, betel nut consumers are actively seeking meanings and power. They subvert the symbolic meanings of betel nut consumption to justify their own practice as well as to rebel against mainstream society and state ideology.

Finally, we also need to examine the production side of betel nut consumption in order to have a holistic understanding of the rise of betel nut consumption in its contemporary context. As I described in Chapter 1, Taiwanese farmers do not have

many choices of profitable things to plant since Taiwan's position has changed in the world system. There is not enough labor in countryside since industrialization drew most young laborers to urban factories after the 70s. Growing betel palms, however, requires a low amount of labor. Moreover, the high profit from betel nut makes it one of the few cash crops that Taiwanese farmers have. This is especially true since Taiwan entered the WTO and Taiwanese farmers face competition from neighboring countries where the costs of all agricultural products are much lower than in Taiwan. In order to maintain agriculture as a way of living on their small farms, Taiwanese farmers have to grow something highly profitable.

The popularization of betel nut in Taiwan has resulted from a combination of both cultural, economic, and political factors as well as individual agency and materialist aspects (such as infrastructure). Betel nut consumption is a realm where individual actors, culture, and social structure intersect. Without the economic change and the government's non-interference, betel nut consumption could not have been revived in the 1970s. Meanwhile, without the cultural meanings of it for Taiwanese, betel nut would be unlikely to have been popularized. Furthermore, it is important to locate Taiwan in its global context to see how capitalism and Taiwan's different positions in the changing world system are involved in popularizing betel nut.

Cultural Intimacy

Betel nut consumption, although being embarrassing, ironically, gives shared ground for both users and the state. As Michael Herzfeld (2005) says,

[T]he centrality of *cultural intimacy* [is] the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality, the familiarity with the bases of power that may at one moment assure the disenfranchised a degree of creative irreverence and at the next moment reinforce the effectiveness of intimidation (Herzfeld 2005:3).

Herzfeld views this common sociality as important because it allows the state to gain legitimacy for its regime. In the case of Taiwan, we have is an independent nation in practice, whose status is largely denied by the international community. As such, it relies on domestic legitimacy more than most other nations in the world who also can count on international recognition by other countries. Despite Taiwan being a democratic country, meaning the government is legitimated by the political system itself, it is still desperate for an external source of legitimacy. In the absence of this, the promotion of nationalism is that much more important.

This legitimacy is needed for governments on Taiwan no matter if they are based on KMT or DPP nationalism. For the KMT, the ROC (Republic of China) as the nation of Taiwan is denied by all but twenty-odd nations, none of which are major powers in the world. Most important of all, the ROC is not a member of the United Nations. In other words, the largest international organization of nations also does not recognize the legitimacy of the ROC government. Therefore, despite Taiwan being a democratic country and having freedom of speech, Taiwanese journalists are not allowed to enter UN level conferences such as the WHO to interview. For the DPP, although in recent years after the DPP became the ruling party, they also have tried to claim the ROC as the nation that represents Taiwan, the core of DPP nationalism is still rooted in Taiwan's independence. The extreme position of DPP nationalism, the intention to build a "Republic of Taiwan," is only a dream so far. There is significantly less legitimacy for recognizing a "Republic of Taiwan" as a nation on the world stage since it does not yet exist. In other words, whether it is KMT or DPP nationalism, both need strong legitimacy domestically in order to deal with the fact that neither of them have legitimacy internationally.

This is where the idea of cultural intimacy becomes important to solving Taiwan's betel nut puzzle. Herzfeld's (2005) idea of cultural intimacy is where the state ironically gains its legitimacy domestically through something which is an "embarrassment" for it as a modern and cosmopolitan place in the world. In the study of betel nut consumption, we can see how betel nut is a national embarrassment for the state's self representation to the global village on the one hand, while it legitimates the state domestically on the other.

Betel nut consumers, through pursuing masculinity, obtain a feeling of power which therefore allows the state to maintain its power over them. Meanwhile, this masculinity suspends class inequality as well as ethnicity. In addition, it provides the ideological foundation of capitalist production for the state's ideology. Seeing betel nut chewing as showing different social identities based on ethnicity hides the class distinctions which also follow ethnic lines. Most important of all, when betel nut chewing is seen as a symbol of local tradition, it then provides both major political parties a safe arena in which to construct and maintain their rival nationalisms on the one hand, and in which to ignore the political economic structure between users and non-users on the other. The very existence of betel nut consumption as a "tradition" then becomes a useful strategy for creating nationalism and maintaining power relationships within Taiwanese society since betel nut consumption becomes the cultural intimacy in Taiwanese society. Through this "betel nut chewing is merely a tradition" interpretation, nationalism is able to draw its motivation safely from an emphasis on locality.

In other words, in the name of being a tradition, this modern commodity is situated in a modern context of nationalisms and the capitalist mode of production. In this national ideology, male power domination, class distinction, capitalist mode of

production, and ethnic differences are justified. In this process, a male bond along different class lines is built to continue servicing the capitalist mode of production. Meanwhile, social identity is built without questioning class domination and therefore nationalism is built safely without threat of a revolution motivated by workers. In other words, although betel nut chewing is a “national embarrassment” for the state externally, it gives a safe and useful way to construct and practice nationalism. It further avoids challenges to the state’s power.

In the beginning of this thesis, I introduced this puzzle from A-Fang-mei’s perspective—a new female migrant in Taiwan who was originally from Vietnam. To her, as well as to many Taiwanese and for the state’s public ideology, the rise of betel nut consumption after the 70s is an embarrassing mystery—Why as Taiwan stepped up to be a more developed and more modern country, was there meanwhile a dramatic increasing in betel nut consumption.

In fact, whenever a foreign news report recommends betel nut chewing as one thing worth trying when people travel to Taiwan, the Taiwanese media often re-reports that news article by emphasizing how odd this is. For example, *New York Magazine* had an article titled “The Ten-Point Escape Plan: Taipei,” written by Rich Beattie (2006). Beattie recommends ten things to do in Taiwan, and the ninth is betel nut chewing. However, the same article, re-reported by Wu Jiaxian and Liang Jiamin (2006) in Taiwan titled “What Are the Fun Things to do in Taiwan? New York Columnist Recommended Betel Nut Chewing,” starts with: “What are the fun things to do and good things to eat in Taiwan? From a foreigner’s perspective, the answer might surprise you.” Wu and Liang then put the main focus of their article on discussing Beattie’s recommendation of betel nut chewing (which originally was only his ninth recommendation).

To Wu and Liang, as well as many other Taiwanese, recommending betel nut chewing is something “surprising.” The indication of “from a foreigner’s perspective” implies that if he were not a foreigner, then he would not make such a recommendation. Most Taiwanese and the Taiwanese government do not feel proud of this betel nut chewing custom and therefore feel surprised if anyone recommends it. However, this same case shows how betel nut chewing, ironically, becomes one of the representative symbols of Taiwan from a foreigner’s perspective despite this being the last thing that the Taiwanese government would want it to be.

One core of this unwillingness is in relation to the state ideology which sees modernization as an evolutionary process. In fact, as I described in Chapter 2, this is a very common thought among Taiwanese as well. This evolutionist way of thinking is what makes the “Taiwan betel nut puzzle” a “modern paradox.” To the Taiwanese government, it is more important to promote Taiwan as a high-tech and rich country in this global village, instead of focusing on some kind of shameful tradition that is still practiced in Taiwan. Yet, as I analyzed previously, betel nut consumption is not a “tradition” at all. It is a “modern paradox” only on the surface.

This is because the betel nut phenomenon itself is an integral part of modernity and modern development in the context of Taiwan. Betel nut consumption, as cultural intimacy, constitutes an essential part of Taiwanese culture not only from an outsider’s perspective, but also by forming a common sociality and legitimating the state’s power domestically. In this cultural intimacy, gender identity, class identity, and social identity intertwine, contest, and reinforce each other and therefore form a common sociality between people (both betel nut users and non-users) and the state. This common sociality is important for the “imagined community” which is necessary in order to construct either of Taiwan’s competing nationalisms.

Cultural intimacy allows us to see, as Herzfeld (2005) indicates, the contradiction between the state's self-representation and people's cultural practice. It shows us how these embarrassments, as a result, assemble state ideology and constitute a common sociality between social actors and the state where different social actors find familiarity and closeness in a modern society. This enables the examination of modernity to escape from evolutionistic thinking. Modernity, in this sense, is not linear progress at all. Instead, it is a matter of cultural change through time. It further shows that what is modern often depends on what "modern" people create as "tradition." There is no universal modernity, rather, there are many modernities based on different cultures. To an anthropologist, the importance of researching modernities is to identify how culture (or "cultural engagement" as Herzfeld describes), social structure, individual agency, and the state play into a cultural intimacy where common ground is formed.

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Appendix: Outline for In-depth Interview

A. Do you chew betel nut regularly? (If the answer is no, ask questions on B section. If the answer is yes, ask questions on C Section.)

B. For people who do not chew betel nut regularly:

1. Have you ever tried chewing betel nut? Yes) what kinds of betel nuts have you tried? Why did you choose that kind? No) did you want to try? Why or why not?
2. (For people who have tried) How did you feel when you tried it?
3. (For people who have tried) In what situation did you try to chew betel nuts?
4. Why don't you have a betel nut chewing habit?

C. For people who do chew betel nut:

1. When was the first time you chewed betel nut? How old were you? What was your job at the time? What were you doing?
2. Where, how, and why did you get your first betel nut to chew?
3. How did you feel the first time you chewed betel nut?
4. Did you like betel nut chewing the first time? Why or Why not?
5. When did you begin to have a betel nut chewing regularly? Why?
6. What kind of betel nut do you like? Why?
7. Have you ever changed the kind of betel nut you chew? Yes) what was the change? Why did you change it?
8. What do you think is the difference between different kinds of betel nut consumers?
9. Do you have any preference in terms of betel nut produce location? Why?
10. Where do you usually chew betel nut?
11. Do you think betel nut chewing is helpful to or interrupting of your work? Why?
12. How does your spouse think about you chewing betel nuts?
13. Do you usually go to same betel nut shop? Why or Why not?
14. Why do you think why you keep chewing betel nuts?

D. For all people

1. Do you drink Whisbih or Paolyta B? How often and why do you drink them?
2. What do you think is the primary job for people who chew betel nuts?
3. What do you think what is the major gender for betel nut consumers? Why?
4. What do you think about women who chew betel nuts? What do you think about woman chewing betel nuts?
5. What do you think about woman smoking? What do you think about women who smoke?
6. Compare a woman who smokes and one who chews betel nut, which do you think is more unacceptable to you? Why?
7. What do you think what is the primary age group of betel nut consumers? Why?

8. Do you think if there is more and more or less and less people in the younger generation who chew betel nut? Why?
9. Do you think there is any difference between betel nut consumers in terms of north and south Taiwan? What are the differences?
10. Do you think there is any difference between people who chew betel nut and people who don't? What are the differences?
11. Why do you think betel nut chewing is popular in Taiwan?
12. Do you think betel nut will become more or less popular in Taiwan in the future? Why?
13. Overall, are you for or against betel nut chewing habit? Why?
14. What do you think what is the ranking for different ethnic groups (aboriginals, Hakka, Taiwanese and mainlanders) to chew betel nuts? Why do you think so? What makes them different?
15. Nowadays, people often talk about "*bentuhua*," what does this term mean to you.
16. People often talk about "identify with Taiwan," what does this term mean to you?
17. What do you think are the two things that represent Taiwan *bentu*?
18. What do you think is the major factor that determines one's social status in contemporary Taiwan?

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